



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

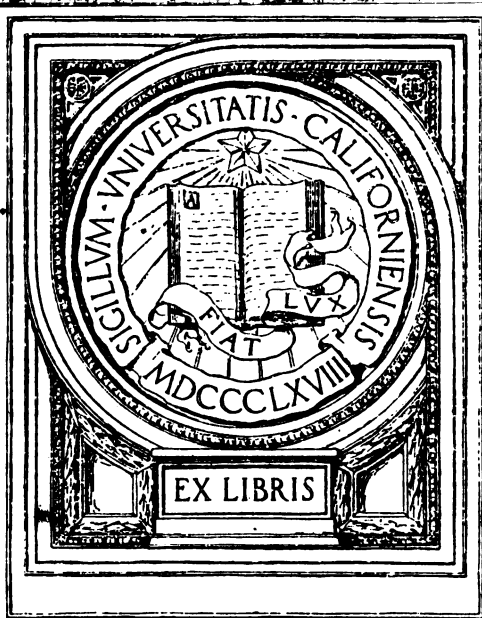
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

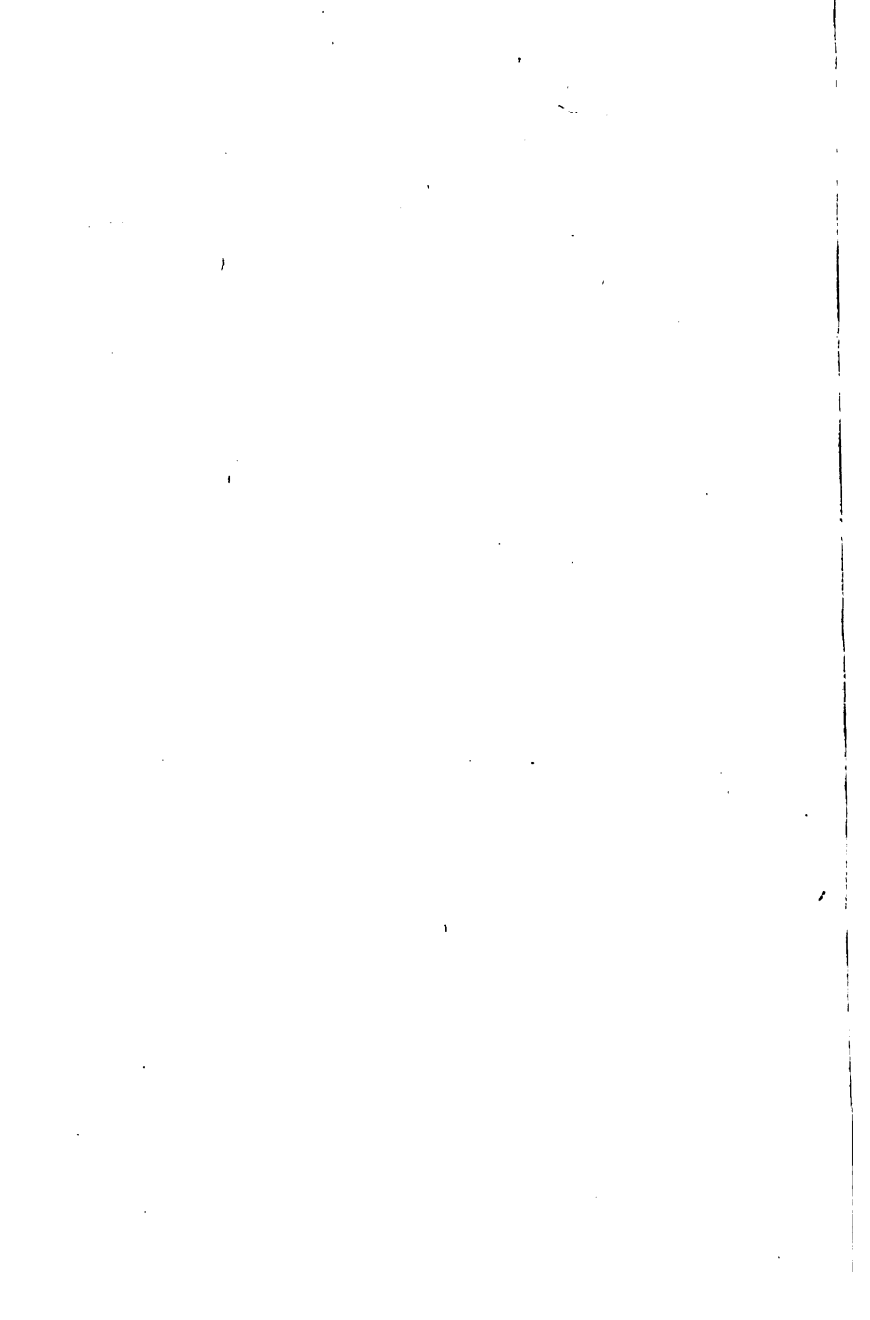
About Google Book Search

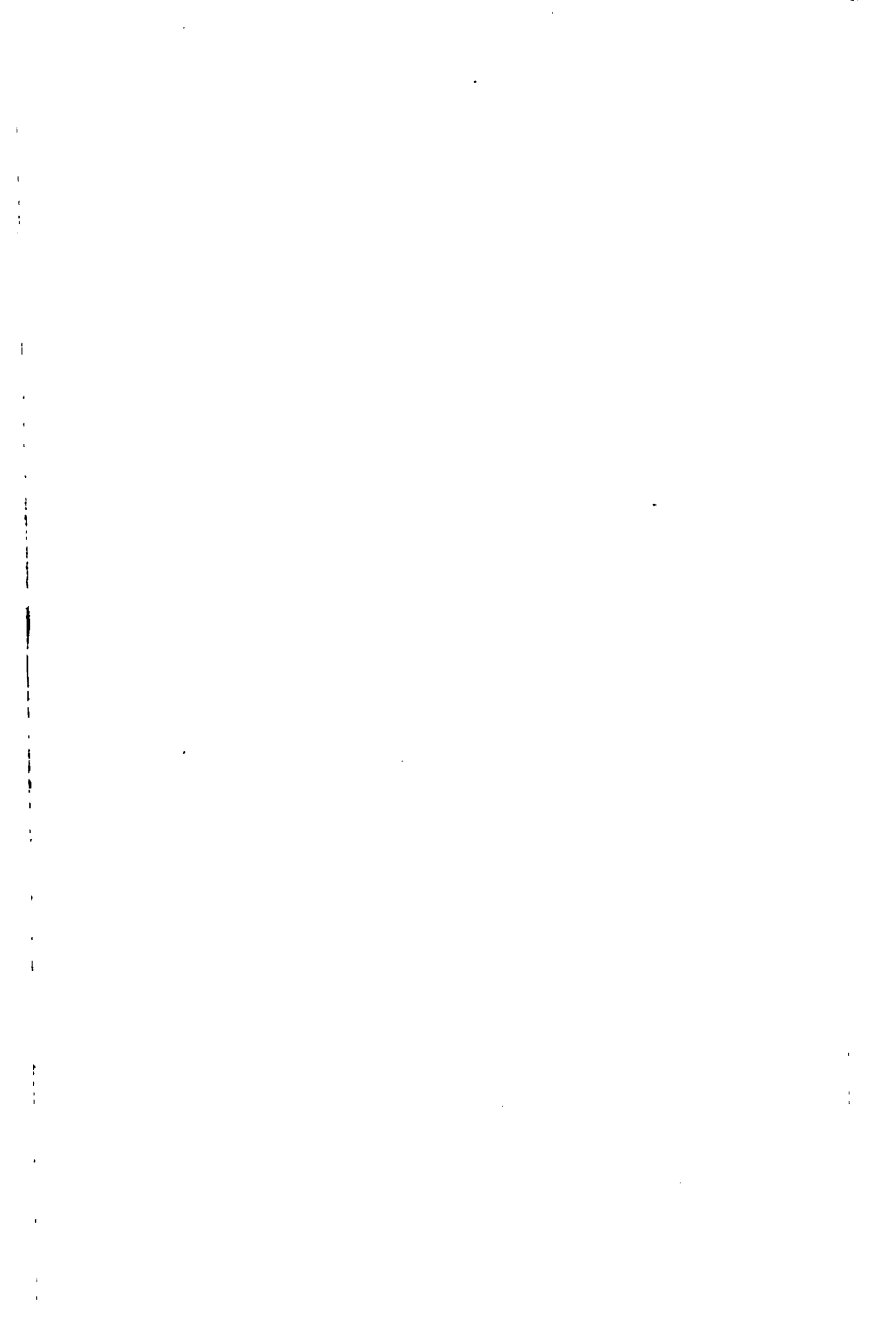
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

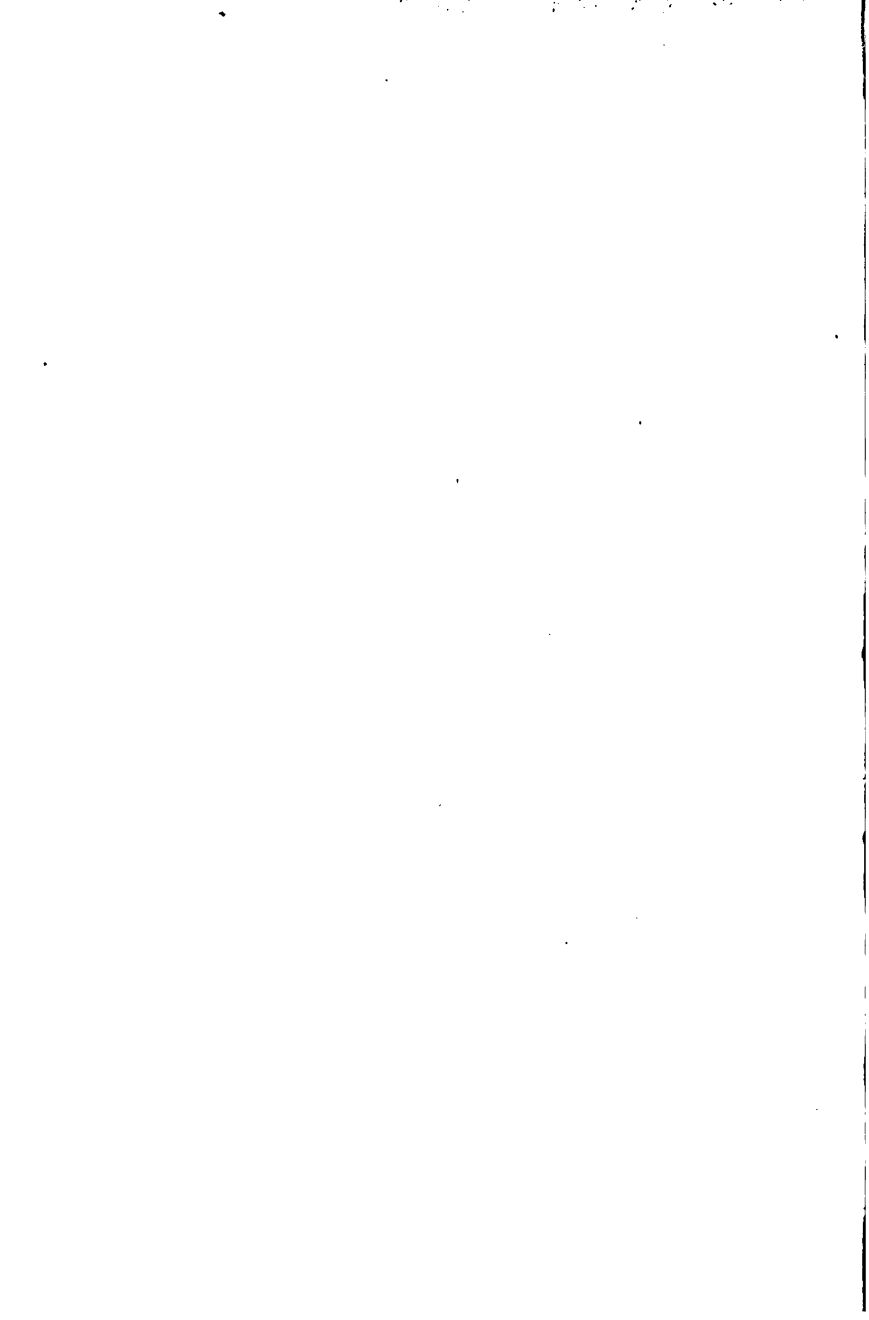


961
W172
y









THE YOKE

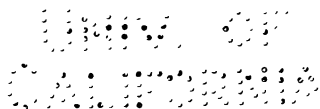
BY

HUBERT WALES

Author of "Mr and Mrs Villiers"

"What! out of senseless nothing to provoke
A conscious something to resent the yoke
Of unpermitted pleasure, under pain
Of everlasting penalties, if broke!"

—OMAR KHAYYAM



NEW YORK
THE STUYVESANT PRESS

1908

961
W172
Y

Copyright 1908, by
THE STUYVESANT PRESS
NEW YORK

THE STUYVESANT PRESS
NEW YORK

Publishers' Introduction to the American Edition

The wide-spread interest which The Yoke has aroused in Europe presages its enthusiastic reception in America.

To those discriminating readers who desire to consider the inadequacy of our social standards, as applied to the morals of men and women, and who find something more than pruriency and indelicacy in a serious discussion of the sex problem, the Publishers respectfully offer this book.

Subtle insinuation has long been esteemed, while more graphic expression has been censured. A lucid delineation of the salient issues of a problem is essential in an earnest effort towards a solution.

Religious teachings, and the ever advancing social standards, have established certain rules, which, while apparently tending towards a higher moral sense, have in reality affected only the dispassionate. Our ideals lead us to a secrecy amounting to hypocrisy.

INTRODUCTION.

Man is, to a certain degree, immune from the disfavor of society. Woman may not transgress the rigid moral standards without incurring its censure and ostracism. To sanction the iniquity of man, but demand purity of woman, has become an attitude of society.

Authors who write sex-problem novels are increasing in numbers. So are the readers. As long as the output comes from earnest writers to whom the subject is vital and their treatment virile, writers impelled by the realism of the subject, so long will the public eagerly continue to read in spite of Mrs. Grundy or the over-nice critic.

The sex-problem is multiform, and varies in individuals as they differ in temperament and environment. The problem presents itself in a great variety of phases, all real, and consequently worthy of portrayal. Perhaps to the great majority it does not present itself as a personal problem at all, but even such fortunate persons cannot ignore its existence or be injured by a knowledge of the temptations which assail the less fortunate of humanity.

FRANKLIN FOSTER

Preface

TO MY FRIENDS

KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

When he was about to go to Press with the eighth edition of this book, my publisher suggested to me that I might care to take advantage of that issue to meet the attacks which have been so unsparingly directed upon it. Time was—and not so long ago—when such an opportunity would have drawn an immediate and eager response. For it is not easy—though we sometimes pretend it is—to sit quite still while work which has cost years of thought and months of effort is flagrantly misrepresented by prejudiced critics. Readers of books do not always read reviews; but most of those whom I am addressing will have gathered, at least from hearsay, that The Yoke has not escaped a full measure of hostile comment. Few books, indeed, of recent years have been so misunderstood;

PREFACE

few have tempted the prim critics of the sensational Press to so incautious a revelation of their native vocabularies.

Heated, indiscriminate assaults of such kind did, I confess, at one time send the desire to remove misconceptions, to explain my aims, to strike back, tingling to the point of my pen. But that spirit has passed. I am no longer stirred to any emotion by these things, not even by my most persistent enemy's latest and most subtle goad—"One, Herbert Wales." I do not wish reply: there is no need for it. For the public has answered for me.

It has answered through all the letters of sympathy and understanding which have reached me from strangers (some, strangers no longer), it has answered through the spontaneous kindly assurances which have been extended to me wherever I have gone, and it has answered, most of all, through the large and increasing welcome which it has given to the book itself. It may be said, perhaps, that any novel dealing with an exceptional theme, especially with sex, will be bought and read from curiosity. That is true to a point. But The Yoke has passed the limit attributable to such an incentive. Long ere this its brief flame would have flut-

PREFACE

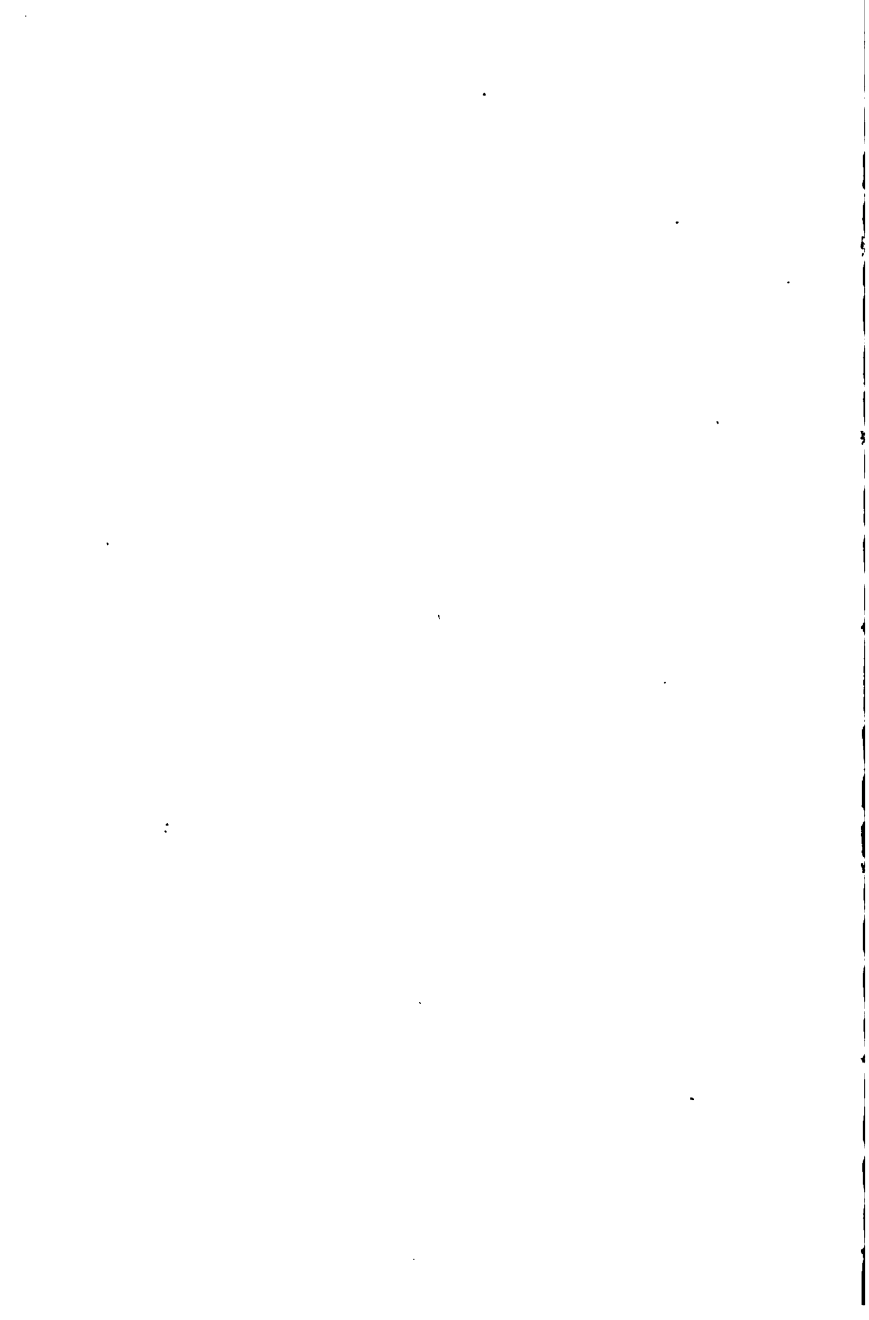
tered out had the public not recognised its sincerity, its profound conviction of truth, its earnest endeavour to set forth a new and less rigorous view—a larger and more liberal view—of some phases of life.

Still, though I have no reply to make, an acknowledgment is surely due from me. The author of a book comes less immediately in contact with his public than the author of a play, but I have the fancy to regard the persistent demands for editions as so many calls to appear for a moment before the curtain, to make my bow, and to retire again into obscurity. For that moment, then—in this short preface—I stand and look across the footlights; not as a defendant, primed with excuse, refutation and counterstroke, but with gratitude and greeting in my heart to the multitude of balanced readers who have shown abundantly that, whether they agree with me or not, they are able to view with a wide mind and to think out without pre-judgment the questions which life presents to them.

HUBERT WALES

HINDHEAD, SURREY

October 1907.



THE YOKE

CHAPTER I

A MAID! A maid at forty!

Angelica laughed a little; not bitterly; rather in sheer amusement at the incongruous association of terms. She was seated at her dressing-table, sipping tea and looking through her letters, clad in a becoming dressing-gown of soft blue nun's veiling.

That in itself was not insignificant of the progress of time. Among the signs of advancing years none is more marked than the ability that comes with them to rise in the morning without effort. "Get up at seven every day of my life, sir." Yes, old healthy septuagenarian, so you do, and so you should. You are not entitled to seek credit for it. You have had all the sleep your frame requires. It would be an infinite bore to you to remain in bed any longer. Time had been, when, morning after morning, Angelica had had

THE YOKE

to rush the final stages of her toilet in order to give her father early breakfast before his daily pilgrimages to the City. Now she voluntarily rose at half-past seven for the cup of tea and two thin slices of bread-and-butter which her maid brought her; when, had she chosen, she could have consumed that light repast without changing from the horizontal.

Still, though it would not halt for her, Time had dealt kindly with Angelica. The arm which slipped from the loose sleeve of her dressing-gown, as she raised her cup, was soft and round and white, with a little dimple at the elbow. Her hair, it is true, was grey, but it was all grey, and not patchy, and it had chosen a pretty shade, and there was abundance of it. Even now, loosely caught up, it was beautiful; later in the day, when the somewhat elaborate operation which she carried out morning and evening before the wide mirror in front of her, had been satisfactorily completed, it was of the quality which drew many a passer-by to look round in the street. Angelica was no humbug, dear reader. She liked to look nice and to be admired; she gave time and thought to the achievement of those ends; and she would

THE YOKE

be the last to ask me to persuade you otherwise. And, while we are on the topic, we may very well record that she generally succeeded in her objects.

She was tall and still slender, but with elegant, wide shoulders and a delicate wealth and symmetry of contour, such as no girl of twenty could dream of possessing. And her movements had that easy grace, her carriage that natural confidence which come also only from the years. Her maidenhood, too, had at least given her that exquisite beauty of cohesion which no mother can have. A soft, calm face, unwrinkled, was illumined by a pair of the deepest and sweetest grey eyes that mortal could wish ever to see. A quiet intelligence, an infinite benevolence and compassion, an all-embracing charity looked out from them as clearly as stars from heaven. You would have trusted them, at the first glance, with all you held dearest on earth.

The matter which had immediately drawn her thoughts to her anomalous condition—a condition which, not unnaturally, was finding an increasingly frequent and insistent lodgment in her mind, with the steady procession of years—was a letter which she held in her hand. It was written on blue-grey

THE YOKE

paper, nearly square, and had been drawn from a large oblong blue-grey envelope. The handwriting was effervescent and irregular, but not without strength, and was distinguished by a great wealth of exclamation points and generally somewhat erratic punctuation. The writer was an old friend, ten years her junior, now married and living in Exeter, brimful and bubbling over with all that bound her to her husband. Angelica could remember answering a ceaseless flow of questions, emanating from her active brain, as she held her little hand during a first pilgrimage of the South Kensington Museum. This was the letter:—

“DEAREST ANGELICA,—Be an angel, like your name!

“Tom is coming home! *Tom is coming home!!* Can you believe it? He has been in Russia six months, and we were only married a year before he went! I’ve counted every single day since he went. Times and times I have thought he was coming, but something has always cropped up to prevent him. How I hate business! It is my only rival. Nothing else would keep him away

THE YOKE

from me I know. But now he has really started.
I had a wire this morning!

"But he has to spend a week in town on his way through. Think of it! A whole week! While I sit here and wait! I just can't do it, dear, so I want you to be an angel, as I said at the beginning, and take me in, and him, too, *of course*. Don't say you have no room. I shall cry if you do. He arrives on Thursday. I know you will have us if you can. You are always doing something for somebody.

"How is Maurice? It is years since I saw him. He must have grown quite out of recollection. Is he too big to send love to now? At any rate, there is heaps for yourself, dear, from your affectionate friend
MAUDE."

Angelica put the letter back in the envelope with a smile and a slight sigh. How happy they were going to be! She knew they were not sufficiently well provisioned with the goods of this world to stand the racket of an avoidable double hotel bill, and it gave her keen and genuine pleasure to be in a position to shorten their separation by a week. Yet the sigh was perhaps ex-

THE YOKE

cusable, perhaps inevitable. These things were slipping by her while she did "something for somebody." That was her life. For forty years she had been doing something for somebody—never for herself.

People there are who appear to have been given a special temperamental adaptation for an ascetic and abstinent life; a life of whole-souled and satisfying devotion to others; placed in the world, as it were, with that single design by the Creator. Angelica was not one of those. No one knew it better than herself. She longed, utterly and unalterably, for protective love, for the support of someone stronger than herself, for the deeper expressions of reciprocal passion.

But Fate had ordered it otherwise. Her mother had lived only long enough, after giving her birth, to call her an "angel"; a word which the sorrowing husband had endeavoured to perpetuate at the font. As soon as she had left school, and even in a partial sense before that event, Angelica had taken up her *rôle*; in the first years in the cause of the creature comforts of her father, a man of excellent intention and sound probity, but in his later years of somewhat crotchety temper, and a

THE YOKE

little too apt to take things for granted, without reckoning the trouble to those around him. At twenty the one man had come into her life; a soldier, a man of deep humanity and strong and striking personality; a widower with a little boy of two. Even in the best of circumstances Angelica had known that her marriage must depend upon the initiative of her father; upon some alternative and satisfactory scheme for his welfare; she would not have voluntarily left him.

But the best of circumstances had not befallen. Within a year of their meeting, her lover's health had developed disquieting symptoms, which an eminent physician had struck her to the heart by diagnosing as cancer. "A tumour, I fear malignant." So, in cold words, had sounded the knell of her life's happiness. She often heard them still, and she saw the thin lips which had uttered them, nor would she ever forget them. She had taken her part in the nursing, through all the stages of that distressing and terrible malady, not shrinking from scenes which tried the nerves even of the trained hospital nurses. At the end he had died in her arms, and his last conscious words were, "Take care of the kiddie, Angelica."

THE YOKE

She had made no parade of her sorrow—she was considered to have borne it well—but for all that she had buried her heart in his coffin. Her nature had been too deeply stirred ever to respond in quite the same way again. And therein she felt at times that she had a grievance against the great Giver and the great Taker-away. He had removed from her the possibility of such deep and absorbing love as could make happy a life-long union; but He had not removed—and He appeared to have no immediate intention of removing—those fundamental instincts which are the base of all sexual love, however superficially etherealised.

Her original piece of the sugar-cake which sweetens entrance into this world for all humanity—the possibility of joy within her—which she had faithfully looked at, without touching, for forty years—had been a pretty big one, and, it seemed to her, grew bigger with watching. It was inevitable, in the conditions on which her earthly lot had fallen, that she should sometimes be brought to wish that the Giver had been less generous. No one knew—perhaps no one ever would know, or suspect—what that same generosity had cost her.

THE YOKE

The vividness of her own imagination occasionally frightened her. And in spite of her vigorous constitution, she had suffered in health, sometimes for months at a stretch—needless breakdowns, it seemed, vexatious and apparently inexplicable.

Five years after her lover's death her father had followed him to the grave. And so, at the age of twenty-five, she had become her own mistress in a more complete sense than it is given to most women to be; with a host of friends but no near relatives, with a comfortable income and a house in Kensington, and with "the kiddie."

For the last twenty years Angelica had been "doing something" for the kiddie in question. He was now a young man of two-and-twenty "eating dinners"; a phrase which comprehended, besides that interesting process, such legal reading as would satisfy a body of not very stringent examiners, and a regular daily attendance at the chambers of a practising barrister. He was no financial burden to her; his father had left him sufficiently provided for. She would have cheerfully acquiesced had it been otherwise, would have been glad. For in that case she would have felt

THE YOKE

a stronger right to direct his footsteps over the somewhat quaky ground which he was now approaching, had, indeed, already set foot upon. Not that she had any cause of complaint. Maurice was a good fellow. He fully recognised his indebtedness to her, genuinely returned the affection she lavished upon him, and cheerfully deferred to her wishes.

This wholesome adolescence was in part due to his inherent soundness and in part to the sensible up-bringing he had received at Angelica's hands. Her methods had been governed by an intelligent grasp of one or two fundamental truths; particularly that no amount of preaching—of "pie-jaw," as it is called—direct or indirect, whether openly from a pulpit, or, worse still, from an arm-chair, or, worst of all, hidden in a story-book, ever benefited the mind of youth. Its only probable effect is to drive off its object at a tangent in precisely the reverse direction from that desired. Didactic methods are an annoyance not to be suffered. It is an open question whether they ever permanently influenced the conduct of anyone, young or old, except those who unconsciously already occupied the same standpoint as the preacher. The knowledge

THE YOKE

of good and evil will not reach us through officious human agency. The feeling that a fellow-creature is endeavouring, however cautiously, to turn our mind, not to the knowledge itself, but to his own particular conception of it, produces irritation and revolt. Boy or man has got to find it out, work it out, worry it out for himself. Then he'll see its force.

Angelica's treatment of Maurice had avoided these mistakes. As he grew up, she had helped him to choose his books, she had given him opportunities of attending places of worship, she had allowed him to watch her own mode of life, while at the same time seeking to gain his respect and affection; finally she had selected the best available mediums for his education; but she had never put pressure on him, and she had never preached.

Her care of his physical well-being had similarly steered clear of conventional stupidities. Has it ever occurred to you, reader, what pigs we make of our children? Foolishly doting parents, in the mistaken hope of producing additional vigour, treat them as vessels to be stuffed to their utmost available capacity. The child, under this fond tutelage,

THE YOKE

finds that a third helping of pudding ranks about equal with winning a race, and considerably higher than a good-conduct mark. Consequently he becomes permeated with the idea that to eat as much as possible is one of the principal aims of existence. He is lucky if he can get through life without suffering for it.

Under Angelica's discriminating up-bringing, Maurice had come out, as she saw with pride and thankfulness, a fine, straightforward, upright young Englishman. She believed he had no vices; and if the tendencies and passions incident to all flesh were developed abnormally, or at all, at least they were discreetly veiled from her.

This was a subject which was giving Angelica considerable concern; not that she feared for his moral welfare—she had no uneasiness about that—but lest, in his thoughtlessness and exclusion from affectionate masculine counsel, he should fall upon material troubles which a lifetime might be insufficient to exorcise. She knew the dangers of the world, especially of a great city, for a young man in his first flush of liberty.

During his Oxford days these apprehensions had not worried her; she had felt that he was more or

THE YOKE

less safe. It was only during the last few months, since he had come to live permanently in town and to make liberal use of his latch-key, that the perils which surrounded him had come home to her, had perhaps assumed, in her imagination, an even more menacing aspect than the reality warranted.

How often she had scanned his face anxiously, especially after some evening when he had returned home later than usual, and had longed to utter a word of warning, to give him some friendly counsel from the wisdom of her riper years, and had been held in check by the stern barrier of sex. Even now, as she rose from her seat and set about the business of dressing, she gave a slight sigh, remembering that she had not heard his key in the lock the previous night. "He must have been very late," she thought.

A little after nine she descended the stairs, clad in a gown of thin grey material, which fitted her beautiful figure to perfection and rustled as she moved, one hand holding her letters and her skirts, the fingers of the other lightly touching the rail of the balusters. The breakfast-table, when she reached it, made an inviting display of china and silver and white napery, but the room was unten-

THE YOKE

anted. She sat down behind the coffee-pot and poured out a cup. A second place was laid at the other side of the round table; and, after waiting a while, she rose and lifted the covers that stood in front of it, helped herself to a whiting, and then took up the dishes and placed them carefully in the hearth. After that she resumed her seat, propped up the *Daily Telegraph* on the coffee-pot, and started her solitary meal.

Presently a maid entered with buttered toast.

"You had better go and knock at Mr Heelas's door, Mary," she said to her. "I think he can't have heard the gong."

"He wasn't in his room, ma'am, when I took his tea," said the maid.

For a moment Angelica's heart stopped beating. Then she said quite calmly: "He has gone out very early. Did he leave any message?"

"No, ma'am," said the maid. "I don't think he came in last night at all," she added.

Angelica turned the paper and folded it to her satisfaction. "He must have stayed with Mr Grahame," she said. "Mary, the blue room must be got ready, please. Mr and Mrs Cunningham will be here on Thursday."

THE YOKE

The maid went out and closed the door quietly. Then Angelica rose—she had no further appetite—and walked to the window and stood there, with her white hands clasped behind her. Every now and then, as she moved them spasmodically, the firelight set a diamond gleaming.

And so it had come! Of course, she had known it *must* come. And yet. . . . She stood a long time at the window, and after a while a tear dropped unheeded on the plant beneath her.

CHAPTER II

"AND let this be a warning to you," concluded the magistrate, "to behave in the future like respectable citizens, and not like young hooligans. You are discharged."

The two young men buttoned their overcoats closely over their evening clothes, took their crush hats, and walked out of the dock and the court, amid a faint murmur, in part suggestive of applause, in part of dissent. They proceeded for some distance in silence. It was not until they had turned into the Strand and become conscious that the passers-by neither knew nor cared whence they had come, that their eyes met. Then one of them—the fat and burly one—burst out laughing; a genuine, hearty peal of boyish mirth.

"Well, I don't see much to laugh at, Grahame," said his companion, who was not so tall but better built, albeit there was a lurking smile behind his own handsome features.

"All's well that ends well," said Grahame.

"Has it all ended well?" said the other. The

THE YOKE

smile was still hovering in his frank eyes. "I can't turn up at Chambers in dress clothes," he added, and the laugh came right out.

"Of course you can't," replied his friend. "You'll have to go home and send a wire that you're ill or something. They'll get through a day all right without you, Heelas."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not ill," said Heelas; "uncommonly well, thank you."

There was no priggish intention in his tone to reprove his friend. It was merely a frank statement of a fact.

Nevertheless, Grahame wished he had not voiced the proposition. He covered that private sentiment, however, with a good-natured smile. "Then you must come to my rooms and borrow a change," he said. "That's the only thing I can suggest."

He himself was reading for the army, and occupied a pair of comfortably-furnished rooms in the neighbourhood of Cambridge Circus; a district, to be sure, rather inconveniently removed from his coach's residence, but central, in his own

THE YOKE

pleasantly indefinite phrase, "for other things"; the "other things" including, as his friends somewhat unkindly reminded him, after the previous night's exploit, a reasonable accessibility to Bow Street.

Heelas gratefully accepted his offer; and then, seeing the Charing Cross telegraph-office, was reminded—not for the first time, nor the second, since his encounter with the police—of Angelica. "I must send her a wire," he said. His brow clouded. "I wish this hadn't happened, Grahame. What silly jackanapes we were to attempt that rescue!"

"Oh, we couldn't have left the other fellows," said Grahame. "We should never have been able to look ourselves in the face again."

"Pretty difficult to do that, as it is," said Heelas. "What became of the girls?"

"They got off, too. We were out of luck. That's all. Never mind; it's an experience. Now it's over, I'm not sorry."

"I am," said Heelas, thinking of Angelica. "After all," he added, "I don't much care for women of that type. I suppose no one does. It's easy and pleasant in a way, but one feels it's a descent to talk to them."

THE YOKE

"Of course it is," said Grahame. "Everything is a descent, except going to work and coming home again, and reading the evening paper, and talking to one's people about the next-door neighbours, and going to bed and getting up. That's the kind of life I should lead if I were made of skim milk and plaster of paris."

"Yes," said Heelas, reflectively, as he went into the telegraph-office; "I suppose that's it."

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, stopping in the doorway and turning almost angrily, "if that's the life we were really intended for, why *weren't* we made of skim milk? I should have no objection to it personally, not the least. But I object to be made of what I am and to be asked to *pretend* it is skim milk."

Therein he was expressing unconsciously—for there was no particular application of the words in his mind—the resentment which is felt, some time or other, by every healthy and sound-minded young man against a social order so incompatible with natural impulse as to compel him to do things he feels to be beneath him.

Heelas announced to Angelica that he was safe and sound and would be home to dinner, and then

THE YOKE

went on with Grahame to his chambers. These were on the third floor; and their furnishing expressed, primarily and emphatically, comfort; some taste, a little art, but chiefly solid comfort. Grahame allowed it to be known, when a statement of his views on the subject appeared to be called for, that chairs which were made to look at were strongly repugnant to his soul. Accordingly, in the small space of the sitting-room, there were two capacious easy-chairs and a wide settee, upholstered in dark green tapestry. There was a warm carpet on the floor, bright fire-irons and a bright fire. The plain green walls were hung with a few coloured sporting prints and some well-executed French mezzotints, representing the undraped female form in varying postures. The mantel held ash-trays and ladies' portraits, and the small side-board a spirit-stand with a syphon and glasses beside it.

"Have a pick-me-up?" said the owner, pointing to the latter.

"Oh, no," said Heelas, almost with disgust.

"Half a jiffy, then, and I'll find you some togery."

He went into an adjoining room, while Heelas

THE YOKE

seated himself in one of the capacious chairs and listlessly surveyed the familiar apartment. He was an exceptionally good-looking youth and utterly unconscious of it. Perhaps the latter characteristic was partly due to the fact that he was quietly but decidedly shy of the society of ladies. Young ladies especially he found particularly overpowering, and he avoided their propinquity almost to the point of discourtesy. To a young man of the age of Maurice Heelas, unless he is remarkably complacent, there is something in the atmosphere surrounding a young lady which inspires a wholesome awe: she seems so wonderfully dressed, so much at her ease, in a way so old; he feels she must necessarily be vain and supercilious, and that she would regard him, at best, as merely experimental matter.

The only woman with whom Maurice came at all frequently in contact was Angelica. She saw his good looks and admired them whole-heartedly. She was fain to admit, in her inmost soul, that he was a finer animal even than his father. But she admired in a far greater degree his perfect naturalness, and was careful not to endanger that by any hint on her part of his personal endowment. All

THE YOKE

she had done was to persuade him to part his hair in the middle, instead of at the side. It fell over his temples in two loose dark brown wisps, and gave a distinction to his straight and regular, but still boyish, features which they might otherwise have lacked.

Grahame returned in a few minutes, with a morning suit over his arm. He was a round-faced, solidly built, cheerful specimen of the genus Briton; lazy and easy-going, but with plenty of native wit in his healthy constitution.

He laid the clothes carefully over the backs of two chairs. "It's a suit I grew out of a year ago," he announced, tenderly smoothing a crease in the coat-tail. "Nuisance that one *will* fill out. I like the pattern of those trousers—always did. Rather a neat thing, don't you think so, Heelas?" He held out the approbated garment for closer inspection. "If old Kenyon asks you for the name of your tailor, you can say it's Humphrey, Jermyn Street, and he won't find a better man in London."

"Old Kenyon," it may be remarked parenthetically, was the eminent barrister to whom Heelas paid daily visits.

THE YOKE

The latter duly commended the apparel put at his disposal, and then hastily donned it in place of his own.

"There's no hurry, is there?" said his host, when this process was completed.

"I don't want to be later than necessary," said Heelas. "Of course I'm hopelessly behind time as it is."

Grahame had ensconced himself comfortably in one of the big arm-chairs and lighted a pipe. "By-the-bye," he said, "this will get into the papers, of course?"

"Rather! They would cram it in if they had to leave out a leading article to find space."

"That's a nuisance," said the occupant of the arm-chair. "It wouldn't do for the Mater to see it. She has queer, old-fashioned notions, and it would upset her. I might wire to Cecil to tell her to hide the sheet. But then the Mater would see the telegram, and want to know what was in it, and that would make it a certainty." He meditated a moment. "Suppose I shall have to chance it. It's a nuisance, though. I wouldn't hurt her on any account."

He relapsed into pensive gloom; and then sud-

THE YOKE

denly brightened. "Look here, Heelas," he said, "you've often promised to spend a week-end with me at Haslemere. Come this week. There's nothing to do. But you would help to smooth down perturbation, if anything got out. You see, you've such a quiet and respectable look; there's nothing rakish about you, Heelas."

Maurice laughed. "It's awfully good of you," he began.

"No, it's not. Of course I know it would be a nuisance. But just to help me through."

Heelas hesitated. He had no adequate excuse; but his mind went in search of one, as it invariably did in the face of an invitation, especially if it involved a meeting with ladies. He remembered Grahame's sister, Cecil, as a girl of fourteen, and his arithmetic pointed to the probability that at the present moment she would be sufficiently overwhelming. The two families had at one time been neighbours in Cumberland Square; but six years ago, after the death of the father, the Grahames had removed to Haslemere; since which time, except for the friendship of Christopher Grahame and Maurice, the households had almost lost touch with one another.

THE YOKE

"I shouldn't like to desert Angelica," Heelas said at last, rather lamely.

"It would only be for a couple of days. Or bring her with you. The Mater would be delighted."

"There would be a difficulty about leaving the house, I expect. The servants, you know, and that sort of thing." He clung desperately to Angelica.

Grahame was too good-natured to be offended, though he saw that his friend was wriggling shamefully. He thought it was disinclination to face the Police Court episode; which, to do Maurice justice, was not the case. He let him down lightly. "Well, think it over," he said.

Heelas cheerfully agreed to do that. He had promised to "think over" an invitation before, and knew from experience that it didn't necessarily, or even usually, involve eventual acceptance. He passed Grahame the newspaper which that gentleman asked for, to save him rising from his comfortable posture, and then set off briskly for the Temple.

He returned six hours later and resumed his own clothes. Grahame was out, probably at some point on his self-imposed daily pilgrimage from Bays-

THE YOKE

water, but Heelas readily found what he wanted. Afterwards he betook himself to the Underground Railway at Charing Cross and entered a District train. He left it at South Kensington Station and walked a little way down the Brompton Road, presently turning into Cumberland Square—a spacious, orderly, tree-embowered enclosure, very bright and fresh just now with soft spring tints.

There was a central space of shrubbery, green lawn and gravel path, jealously guarded by high railings and locked gates. A large church occupied the east side, fronted by a leafy churchyard, with a vicarage garden at the back. On the north and south sides were substantially-built, grey residences, each with a small, neatly-kept railed garden-space in front of it. Here and there, on the south side, the said garden-spaces were crowded with agents' "To let" boards, jostling one another for prominence—somewhat to the detriment, it must be admitted, of the general effect of prosperity and substance. The houses on the west side, facing the church, were of red brick and more modern. Also they lacked the gardens (and the boards).

An atmosphere of dignified calm rested upon the square. There were no little boys interrupting its

THE YOKE

peace; the tradesmen's carts drew up at the area gates only at well-ordered times and without unnecessary clatter. At each of the four corners was a neat iron tablet bearing the words,—

ORGAN MUSIC AND OTHER STREET NOISES ARE STRICTLY PROHIBITED IN THIS SQUARE.

Even without such prohibition, one would scarcely have conceived even a street noise sufficiently audacious to invade its cultured precincts.

Angelica's house was almost in the middle of those of red brick on the west side. As Maurice approached it, he was aware that his heart was beating faster than it was normally entitled to beat. He suddenly steadied his rather rapid rate of progression and went on more sedately. He paused for a moment before the polished front door, painted a dark green and shining with brass work. Then he took his latch-key from his pocket and quietly—quite quietly—let himself in.

CHAPTER III

USUALLY, if Angelica did not meet him in the hall, at least she gave him a hail. To-night there was no sound, no Angelica. Maurice had not thought about his clothes during the journey home, but now he became again acutely conscious of them, particularly of his soiled and disordered shirt-front and his muddy boots. As he hung up his hat and overcoat, he tried to persuade himself that he was doing so in the customary manner, without any attempt to avoid a rude disturbance of the prevailing silence. But when he went upstairs to his room, he knew that he was walking stealthily, for he realised for the first time that his boots creaked. So did Angelica, as she sat in the drawing-room.

Maurice changed his shirt, removed his boots, and generally repaired his attire. Then he presented himself in the drawing-room. Angelica was seated before the fire with a book on her knee. She did not rise when he entered; but she looked up and there was even a smile on her face. But it

THE YOKE

clearly came there as the result of an effort. And she did not speak.

Maurice would have given his hope of the Bench to have been able to live the previous night over again: not from a selfish shrinking from the restraint of the present position, but because he saw that he had brought her real pain. For a moment an impulse came over him to throw himself at her feet and beg her forgiveness. But he was not naturally demonstrative, and the moment passed. He walked up to the fireplace and stood with his back to it.

"I sent you a telegram, Angelica," he said. "Did you get it?"

"Yes," she replied. "It was thoughtful of you, Maurice. I was anxious. You didn't say where you had been?"

"It was rather difficult," said Maurice. He paused a moment, and then added, a little whimsically: "I couldn't put in a telegram that I'd spent the night in a police-station."

"What!"

The tone and the look expressed something for which Maurice was totally unprepared. It was not horror; it was not repugnance; it was joy. The

THE YOKE

listlessness had fallen from her; she was sitting up in the chair, alert and bright-eyed.

"What?" she repeated.

"In a police-station," said Maurice again, speaking tentatively, rather fearful that the bald and isolated phrase would destroy the unlooked-for effect.

The book slipped from Angelica's lap, and she sprang at him and caught him by the shoulders and kissed him first on one cheek and then on the other.

"I'm so glad," she cried.

Maurice was lost in a maze; but he accepted cheerfully the unexpected good which the gods seemed determined to shower upon him. Then the whimsical side struck him.

"It's not as comfortable as the Cecil," he remarked drily.

Angelica bent down and poked the fire. Not that it required poking, but that she felt the need of some outlet for the superabundant energy surging up in her.

"Poor boy!"—prod. "Did they put you in a"—prod—"cell?"

How unsatiable is human nature. A few min-

THE YOKE

utes earlier Maurice would have been relieved beyond measure to know that Angelica could take his escapade so lightly. Now he was beginning to feel distinctly aggrieved that his sufferings elicited so little sympathy.

"No," he said, "they drew the line at that. We spent the night in a sort of office."

"Who's 'we'? Christopher Grahame?"

"Yes. It was no more his fault than mine, Angelica," he went on rapidly. "I was every bit as much to blame—perhaps more."

"Oh, I don't object to Chris, my dear," said Angelica. "I think you might have many worse companions. He's a nice boy. I like him."

"I'm awfully glad," said Maurice, brightening with genuine pleasure. "You know, I always thought you imagined he was rather—oh—go-ahead."

"He is rather lazy," said Angelica. "That is his chief fault. Unless he does more work he will be ploughed for Sandhurst, and that would be hard for his mother. I don't think they are very well off, and she is making an effort to get him into the army."

"Oh, he'll pull through all right," said Maurice,

THE YOKE

with confidence. "He does much more work than he wants one to think. The last person he would like you to meet would be his coach, because he would give him too good a character. The only thing that worried him about this affair was the thought that some account of it might reach his mother and upset her."

Angelica stood up again. There was something silken in her skirts which rustled when she moved. "Well, tell me about it," she said lightly. "What mischief had you been getting into? And are you free now or on bail?"

"Of course I'm free," said Maurice, quite hurt. "Angelica!"

"It was a mistake?"

"Oh, no." He fell back a little precipitately upon his main position. "There's no doubt we were in the wrong. Some fellows were down from Oxford, and they got rowdy outside the Empire, and the police interfered. We tried to rescue them. The rest got away. Angelica—I'm awfully sorry—we had had too much to drink."

Angelica laughed, actually laughed. "And so it was a real old-fashioned fight. What was it you used to call it at Harrow—a mill? Let me

THE YOKE

look at you and see if there are any scars of battle?" She turned him round to the lamp. "Yes, there's a lump there"—she laid a slender forefinger on the neighbourhood of his cheek-bone—"and a scratch there. You are not discredited, old boy; but you'll live to fight another day."

The gong had sounded while she was speaking. She placed an arm in his and pressed it happily. Then she picked up her skirts with the other hand, and they went gaily down to dinner together.

In the calm provided by the meal Maurice arrived, without much difficulty, at a consciousness of that which Angelica had feared of him, in contrast with which his actual escapade had seemed so trifling. The knowledge troubled him, and he fell more and more into silence. Angelica, on her part, was not much inclined to talk. The misery she had suffered from the fancy of some ill-considered and perilous lapse on his part, and the relief with which she had hailed what was, after all, a serious piece of folly, had shown her how deeply his welfare was imbedded in her heart. She was making up her mind to break through that barrier of sex which had held her silent for so many years. She could no longer endure to sit

THE YOKE

quietly and wait for that which, in the circumstances of his present environment and complete freedom from restraint, seemed well-nigh inevitable, without making some effort to prevent it.

She looked across at him, as he bent over his plate, peeling an orange: handsome, very boyish, very fresh, all unconscious, as it seemed to her, of that black cloud of sin and suffering and degradation which hung over fair youth; and her thoughts found silent expression, now for his sake, in the yearning within her which was never subdued: "If only his father had lived!"

But she did not speak until they had left the table and betaken themselves to a cosily-furnished room at the back of the house, called for distinction the "morning-room," but used chiefly in the evenings, when they were alone. Its principal contents were two or three wicker-work chairs, a small table and a Chesterfield couch, arranged in something of a circle about the fireplace, two oil-lamps, burning under crimson shades, a wide Sheraton bookcase, filled with brightly-covered, readable-looking books, and a large and—it must be confessed—somewhat untidy writing-desk.

The latter was Maurice's. When he felt lazy,

THE YOKE

he made up his mind to take its disorder seriously in hand on the following day, and, when he felt energetic, did something better worth his time. To-night his mood rather inclined to the former quality. He lighted a pipe, took a current magazine from a shelf, and settled himself comfortably to read it. Angelica had already occupied a chair beneath one of the lamps, with some fancy-work.

"Maurice," she said, "will you let me ask you a question?"

"As many as you like," said Maurice, dropping his magazine and smiling at her.

"It's not an ordinary one; it's rather delicate and personal—rather difficult to ask."

Maurice's expression changed. He looked at her wonderingly, and with a little surprise. "I'll answer it if I can," he said.

Angelica hesitated for words. "Up to now," she said, slowly, "up to now you have been what is called 'straight'?"

Maurice flushed deeply, and turned his face to the fire in front of him. He had all the bashfulness of youth, and he was supersensitive. The mention of such a subject by a woman appeared to him to border on indelicacy.

THE YOKE

"Yes, I have," he answered, almost sharply; then paused, and added: "That would have been an uncommonly awkward question to answer, if I couldn't have given you that reply."

"You wouldn't have lied?"

"I don't know."

"*Would* you, Maurice?"

"No, I suppose I shouldn't. But still," he persisted, "I don't think it was quite fair."

She crossed to the chair next him, and took his hand. "Don't be cross with me, Maurice," she said softly. "You don't know what it means to me. You don't know what I've gone through to-day on your account."

Maurice looked at her earnest face, into those deep, trustable grey eyes. Then he remembered her attitude and expression when he first entered the drawing-room, and his conscience struck him.

"I'm awfully sorry," he simply said. And he returned the pressure of her hand.

"You know, dear," Angelica went on, "I hope you know the risks and dangers of a great city like London?"

He shrank into his shell again and tried to withdraw his hand, but Angelica clung to it.

THE YOKE

"You *must* let me talk to you," she said. "I'm nearly twice your age. I've mothered you since you were a toddling mite. There is no man to do it for me. You are fatherless, and friendless but for me. Someone must—and there is no one else."

"I don't see the necessity," said Maurice, doggedly.

"I want you to know," she went on, without heeding, "that it would break my heart if anything happened to you, anything serious, anything that might ruin you for life."

Maurice made no response for a time. He was staring into the fire and rippling the edges of the magazine with his thumb.

"You can trust me, Angelica," he said, at last.

"To—to refrain?" She hung on her breath for his reply.

"To take care. Oh, you don't understand," he cried, with sudden excitement, springing up from his chair. "There are some things a man *must* do, or go mad. You are a woman, Angelica, and you don't understand."

"I do," said Angelica, quietly. "I am a woman and I do understand. It is *because* I am a woman that I understand."

THE YOKE

The words carried all the more force for the simple tone in which they were uttered. Maurice forgot the tempest of self-demand which had flung him from his seat, stood quite still, and looked at her with half-caught comprehension.

"Why do you men always assume a monopoly of these human attributes?" Angelica continued, after a slight pause. "Why do you arrogate to yourselves the sole need and credit for self-conquest?" She was speaking slowly and distinctly, without raising her voice. "I have had my battles to fight as well as you. . . . I have them still—" she suddenly dropped her eyes—"for I have not won them yet."

The last words were uttered in so low a tone that Maurice hardly caught them, and a soft colour came into her cheeks.

It was important, perhaps, that he did not miss them, for they produced two very notable and lasting effects upon him. In the first place, they impressed him with a new and a truer conception of women in general, and increased his respect for them; and, in the second, they enabled him to recognise that Angelica herself, in spite of her grey hairs, was still a very attractive woman. There

THE YOKE

is nothing—nothing in this world—which so surely brings home a woman's youth to the mind, which shouts it with so clear and cogent a voice, as the knowledge that the fervours and passions of humanity are still awake in her.

Except for the light colour in her cheeks, Angelica had changed in no outward particular in the last few minutes: the lamplight fell softly on her grey hair, gleamed on her smooth, white shoulders, and picked out the diamonds on her clasped hands. But by her confession she was re-pictured, once and for all, on Maurice's mental retina. He saw in her, for the first time, something besides a foster mother, a kind guardian, an amiable and atrophied husk of what might have been, long ago, before he was born, pulsating womanhood. The scales fell from his eyes and she was transfigured before him; throbbing with unabated youth, subject to its joys and its pains, conscious in herself of that living fire which seethed in his own veins.

From that moment there occurred a subtle change in the relationship of these two. It was evidenced by Maurice's very next action. He resumed his vacated chair, and, of his own accord,

THE YOKE

took her hand and pressed it. He expressed nothing in words, and for some minutes there was silence between them.

At last Angelica took up her thread again.

"I want you to promise me, Maurice," she said, "not that you *won't* (I wouldn't ask that of you) but that you will remember that I am human, and can understand and sympathise with you, and that you will talk to me honestly if you are tempted to do anything rash."

"That's nearly the same thing, isn't it?" said Maurice. "It means I can't go out at night—not alone, that is—or with Grahame or other fellows."

Angelica thought a moment. "Yes, it means that, Maurice—without telling me."

Maurice laughed a little. "I'm to come and ask leave for a night off?" he said.

She looked up and met his glance with her own, perfectly frank, with irresistible appeal and trust in it. "Yes," she answered.

Still Maurice temporised. "That's rather a large order," he said. "Supposing a man met me in town and suggested dining there and going to a music-hall, am I to say I can't without leave?"

THE YOKE

"I only ask you to fulfill the spirit," said Angelica, simply.

There was a pause. Maurice rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe; then slowly filled and lighted it again. He did it with unusual thoroughness. He took out his knife and scraped away the bottom ash, and then closed it again with a click. Nevertheless, during the process he had made up his mind.

"You know what you are asking, Angelica?" he said.

"I've told you."

"And you still ask it?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then; I give you my promise. Now let's talk of something else."

He went to his desk and deliberately sat down with his back to her. He was afraid of being thanked. There was no fear that Angelica would make a fuss. But he knew that she would be very sweet; and, with his new-gained knowledge, he wasn't sure that he felt up to meeting her eyes, if she looked at him as she *could* look. So he pulled a sheet of paper towards him and wrote to an imaginary person to say that he should be

THE YOKE

pleased to meet him, as suggested, on the following day, to discuss the matters that were outstanding between them. And a little later, when Angelica wasn't looking, he surreptitiously tore it up and dropped it in the waste-paper basket.

It was almost an hour before his usual time when he got up to go to bed.

"I'm tired," he said. "Didn't get much sleep last night"—with a slight laugh. "You'll excuse me, won't you, Angelica? Good-night."

He *was* tired. There was a droop about him as he walked slowly to the door and out. So it seemed to Angelica.

She stood a few minutes in front of the fireplace, looking down into the red glow. . . . She had won a respite. But, after all, to what end? He would lead the man's life. Some woman, sooner or later—

Some woman, sooner or later? She took a breath. *Some woman?* There was that at the tail of the thought which affected her violently. The room reeled and spun. She dropped suddenly and heavily into a chair.

CHAPTER IV

MRS CUNNINGHAM came down the hall, moving her small person quickly by dint of fast, small steps. She was slightly short-sighted, and this gave an appearance of peering to her rather roguish brown eyes.

"You are quite a dear," she said to Angelica, who came out of the morning-room to meet her, "quite the veriest dear in the world," and she stretched out both her hands and put up her soft glowing face.

"I think the shoe is on the other foot," said Angelica. "It is very sweet of you to come. It is much too long since we have seen you." Then, drawing back and scanning her, "Why, how well you look! I think matrimony suits you, Maude."

"Of course it does," said Maude; "it suits everyone." She seated herself without ceremony in one of the wicker chairs in the morning-room. "Or perhaps I ought to say it used to suit me," she added, laughing. "I suppose I've been living on memories."

THE YOKE

"That isn't always a very satisfying diet," said Angelica, softly. She closed the door and came to sit by her friend.

The latter edged adroitly away from the subject of memories. "No, it isn't," she said. "Imagine a husband whose business is liable to take him away at any moment for six months at a time! I really wish I had wasted a little." She surveyed her dainty, plump person with disapproval. "Then, when he saw me, he would be sorry perhaps. And, before I married, I thought it wouldn't matter much!"

"Neither it does," said Angelica, smiling. "You are much happier really; you quarrel less and appreciate one another more."

"We never quarrel," said Mrs Cunningham, emphatically.

"Never?"

"One doesn't count small differences about quite absurd things," said the little wife, honestly. "For instance, there was a hat of mine—"

"Oh, I don't want to hear the details," said Angelica, laughing. "It's those quite absurd things that make all the mischief."

THE YOKE

"Anyhow, we didn't quarrel," persisted the matron, sturdily.

"You hadn't time," said Angelica.

Mrs Cunningham screwed up her eyes in a quaint little way of her own—partly the result of her short sight—and looked closely at her hostess. "Angelica, you are becoming quite cynical in—in—"

"In my old age?" said Angelica. "Am I? I don't think so, dear. You mustn't take me too seriously. What time do you expect your husband?"

"He gets to Charing Cross at two forty-four." She hesitated. "It's very silly, Angelica, but I'm really quite nervous about meeting him."

"Shy? Well, of course," said her hostess. "But it won't last long."

"It's not merely that. There's something else. You see, when he went away—we had been married some time—and we hoped—that—that—"

"I see," said Angelica. "And the hope is not going to be fulfilled?"

"No," replied Mrs Cunningham, quickly, delighted to be relieved of more explicit expression. "Isn't it disappointing?"

THE YOKE

"Good gracious!" said Angelica, suddenly. "How long were you married—I mean, before he went away?"

"Nearly a year," said the representative of wedlock; and she peeped up at her hostess with that quaint contraction of her features, and with rather a defensive gleam in her merry brown eyes.

"Why, what *were* you doing all that time?" cried Angelica, laughing.

Mrs Cunningham was adequately shocked. "You are really almost indelicate," she complained, "especially for a—for a—"

"For an old maid?" suggested Angelica.

"No, no." Yet she knew she had only been searching for a less objectionable synonym. "Angelica"—suddenly—"why don't you marry?"

Angelica was about to put her off with a light reply; then she changed her mind and looked at her frankly.

"Do you know, Maude, that is a very foolish question."

"You have never met anyone nice enough?"

"Indeed, I have; but none that could appeal to *me*—sufficiently. Except, of course—" She stopped.

THE YOKE

"Oh!" said Mrs Cunningham, pathetically, "will you never outlive that?"

"Never," said Angelica. "I don't want to."

"But still," persisted the little matron, "people are sometimes able to feel again—not quite the same, perhaps—but very much."

Angelica looked at the bright, glowing face—at this moment full of solicitude for what she believed to be her happiness. Again she hesitated, and again she decided to answer her seriously.

"Well, you have tried matrimony for a whole year, Maude," she said, "to say nothing of the six months that don't count. Would you honestly tell me that 'not quite the same' is good enough? Good enough to set one's seal to a life-long bond?"

Mrs Cunningham gave her earnest consideration to the question.

"No, perhaps not in your case," she said, at last; "but I think it is for people who have to."

People who have to! She uttered the words in a thoroughly matter-of-fact tone, as thousands utter them daily. She had no idea how they grated on Angelica.

"After all," she summed up reflectively, "you are very happy. You have all you want."

THE YOKE

There was a faint suggestion of the interrogative in each statement, but Angelica passed it by.

"I can't bear to think there are people who believe they 'have to,' " she said. "Don't ever let your daughters think that, Maude."

"I haven't got a daughter," said Maude, dolefully. "Why did you remind me of it again? I was almost forgetting."

She contrived to make of herself quite a pathetic little figure, composed of a base of genuine trouble and a considerable superstructure of sham. But the sham was of the flimsy quality which is not intended to deceive.

"Are you really worrying about it, dear?" said Angelica, gently. "I don't think you need. But why didn't you tell him at once in one of your letters?"

"I intended to," said Maude, penitently; "but there was always such a lot to say, and I forgot. No, I didn't," she corrected honestly, "I put it off. I thought—oh, I don't know what I thought!"

"Little goose! Well, he has probably forgotten all about it by this time."

Maude shook her head. "Oh, no, he hasn't," she said decidedly. "He went away quite hap-

THE YOKE

pily. He thought it was quite sure. So did I." The dismal memory took her hand to her pocket; but having extracted an exquisite little piece of cambric, she decided after all not to use it. Only Angelica was aware of the faint but pungent perfume which she always connected with Maude. "He would have been so proud," concluded the latter, stretching the handkerchief from corner to corner, as if to make sure that it was square.

"You mean 'pleased'?" said Angelica.

"Yes, pleased, of course; and proud, too—very proud," reasserted the wife.

The distinction was not worth pursuing; but Angelica's mind travelled back to some of the tragedies, little and big, which had floated across her ken, in connection with parentage. It is so easy to lose all sense of proportion. Adjust it accurately, and is there a more pathetic or ridiculous object than a man who is *proud* of having become a father? Proud of having achieved a feat which, under God, is found perfectly easy of accomplishment by a farmyard rooster! Dame Nature, who pitilessly pursues her inexorable purpose in laden slums, through shamed homes and over broken hearts, may well be conceived to smile at man's

THE YOKE

"pride" in his share of her work, when it happens to have been carried out with the pomp and circumstance of matrimony and in accordance with his wishes.

After lunch Mrs Cunningham set off in fluttering spirits to meet her husband. An hour or two later Angelica heard a cab draw up outside the house. There was a ring at the door-bell and a sound of luggage being moved; and then Maude came into the drawing-room, flushed and happy, followed by a broad and muscular but rather short man, with a kindly expression, well-marked features, and a light, drooping moustache. The disappointment had evidently been overcome, for the barometer in both their countenances stood at "set-fair."

Angelica rose. "So you have got him, Maude," she said, smiling.

"Got him without hope of escape," said the captive, shaking hands and laughing cheerily in a resonant voice of honest bass. "This is remarkably good of you, Miss Jenour."

Tom Cunningham was an excellent example of the type of humanity which supplies the bulk of modern Britain—sincere to the backbone, strong-principled, orthodox, unimaginative. A nation

THE YOKE

might be built on much worse material, but it has its obvious limitations. It is not the bigot who bars the advance of enlightened ideas in what are called moral questions. He is transparently what he is—narrow, noisy and negligible. It is the tremendous mass behind him of ordered orthodox thought. It says little, does little; it simply *is*. It won't argue, won't be convinced, won't change, *can't* change. We hate it; we know its wrong-headedness, its infinite stupidity. It stands in our way and makes us rage. But we admire it, we are almost proud of it, for its transparent sincerity and its magnificent stolidity.

Angelica told her guest that she was very pleased to see him, and asked him if he had had a comfortable journey; to which he replied with a guarded affirmative, and went on to relate certain incidental experiences mildly satirical of modern methods of travel. All of which came out in a flowing, easy voice, and was accompanied almost continuously by his mellow laugh, like the roll of drums behind sonorous wind instruments playing an air. Angelica gave due recognition to these *jeux d'esprit*, and then tactfully relieved them of her

THE YOKE

society by suggesting that Mrs Cunningham should herself show her husband his room.

"It is quite possible," she warned them, "that dinner may be dragged forward to some unconscionable hour. I told Maurice to get theatre-tickets for one or two nights; and as to-night would be the least convenient, he will probably choose it."

"Oh, really, Miss Jenour," demurred the man of commerce, "you mustn't entertain us. We are simply interlopers and very thankful for a shelter."

"The obligation is on our side," replied Angelica, brightly. "We should never see anything at all if it weren't for our visitors. We are much too unenterprising to go alone."

There was nothing particularly funny in the remark. Nevertheless, Mr Cunningham's rich laugh floated deprecatingly back to Angelica as he left the room on his way upstairs.

CHAPTER V

ANGELICA took up some fancy-work and sat down before the fire. She lifted a black silk bag lined with pale yellow from beside her chair, and, after patient search, extracted from it the materials she required, and then, having held her needle to the light and threaded it, set diligently to work to blend arbitrary colours upon the petals of an impossible flower. The drawing-room was immediately beneath the blue room, and, as she worked, she could hear footsteps moving in the room above, and the muffled sound of voices. No words were distinguishable, but she could tell perfectly plainly when the man was speaking and when the woman.

Suddenly she started violently and sat bolt upright in her chair. The voices were still an indistinct murmur, but a new quality had come into the tones—a quality which pierced the intervening plaster and woodwork as if it had been paper—a joyous, nervous tension. Words came on the edge of a half-caught breath, especially in the treble

THE YOKE

tones. And the short laughs were no longer quite spontaneous. But in those also there was joy—deep, underlying, quivering joy.

The effect on Angelica was electrical. A tremor swept through her; all the blood in her veins shivered back to her heart and left her cold. A moment before she had been calmly doing fancy-work. Now—by a subtle, slight change in the note of barely audible voices—she was trembling with uncontrollable excitement and agitation.

She could have spared herself in a measure—spared a temperament strung so exquisitely that even so small an influence set the strings tumultuously vibrating—by leaving the room. In a measure only; for remembrance would have called imagination to its aid and have still kept her on the rack. But she did not leave the room; she could not; the electric wires had been joined, the current was surging through her, and she was utterly in its grip. On the contrary, she listened. She was incapable of meanness—she never thought of it—only her own storming instincts imperiously claimed that much recognition. She was moved by something stronger than herself. *This* she would have; *this*, at least, she would have. All

THE YOKE

the beaten-down nature of her forty years of repression found vent in this poor outlet. So she listened—listened with straining ears.

Her imagination became almost preternaturally vivid. She saw into the room above as clearly as if she had been standing within it. The whole scene was reproduced in living colours on the retina of her brain. Every movement, every sound conveyed its accurate meaning to her. It did not surprise her at the time that it should be so—as it did in the retrospect—she assumed it as a perfectly ordinary faculty.

Presently came a sound she was waiting for—which she knew must come. . . . But the projected thought did nothing to diminish the effect of the thought externalised in actuality. She gripped the elbows of the chair to steady and support herself. She was not merely trembling; she was shaken through and through. Her blood seemed to be staunched at her heart and to have ceased to flow. She ground her teeth, but could not save them from chattering. And though she strove to check it, a low moan—as from a child in pain—was wrung from her.

[This was actual physical suffering. She hardly

THE YOKE

noticed that. She was in a thralldom which made it nothing. What gripped her with passionate resentment was that its violence prevented her taking further draughts from the well whose bitter-sweet waters had caused it. The moments were flying, and she could no longer hear. She set her will with all her might, and at last obtained a temporary respite. . . . The voices had become intermittent and monosyllabic. She heard but for the briefest moment. Then the agitation surged over and through her again and again and again.

There were no further respites. By the time the attack had spent its force there was silence in the room above. For the space of, perhaps, a minute, Angelica sat quite still, her face pale and strained, still trembling slightly. Then, slowly, she bowed her head into her hands and sobbed. For the first time since she was a child she wept for herself. And now and then the tremors seized her once more and shivered through her, like squalls on a still lake.

She thought of the barren past and the barren future. There was this joy in the world—for all

THE YOKE

she knew, a greater than existed in any world, now or to come—and *she was not to know it.*

A wave of bitterness swept over her. She was a maid. There were thousands of maids such as she; not created to that end by their Maker, but forced to be such by the conditions of existence which man had set up. Who had a right to say to her and her sisters that they must never live to the fulness of their inheritance, must never eat of the tree of knowledge, bitter though it might often be, but sometimes very sweet? Who had a right to graft upon the world arbitrary social forms, which involved this callous discarding of the overplus of women? For a man there was some relief, a certain tacit license, objectionable as such, but still existing. But for a woman? Let her renounce her freedom, let her give herself up wholly and unconditionally into the keeping and control of another; that irrevocable bond, or—*nothing.*

Gradually this vehement mood dropped from her and her thoughts ran in quieter channels. But the sense of injustice remained. She knew it was wrong that she should be sitting there, demanding to live to the ends of her womanhood, and be met

THE YOKE

by the fiat that she must first of all enter into a contract which was possible only at the price of being false to her intellect and her soul, and unfair to whomsoever might accept it. She knew that was wrong, because her instinct told her so.

But she did not inveigh against Eternal Purpose. Only it occurred to her to wonder—perhaps for the first time in her life—if that purpose had necessarily been correctly interpreted by man. One did not give a child cake to watch its poor efforts to keep it from its mouth. Human instincts were given us for some end beyond supplying an exercise for the ascetic faculties. “If a thing is pleasant it is wrong.” That appeared to express the sum product of human endeavour to penetrate divine intention. One had grown into the habit of assuming it to be right. . . . Was it? . . . *Was it?*

Angelica started from her seat, struck by the sudden vigour of the thought. It fired her blood and quickened her intelligence with a new light. She saw the false premise, the distorted conception of the Creator’s infinite beneficence, upon which man’s dictum was founded.

THE YOKE

"What! out of senseless nothing to provoke
A conscious something to resent the yoke
Of unpermitted pleasure, under pain
Of everlasting penalties, if broke!"

He never did, and He never would. That yoke is of man's fashioning.

It has lain heavily on your tender neck, Angelica. For five-and-twenty years—all your adult life—you have carried it without question, as part of the manifold human ills to which you were born. Now it occurs to you to ask "Why?" And for that—just for that—my readers are beginning to shake their heads at you; they whose yoke has perhaps been light. Some of them have stopped reading about you already. They think you are going to turn out to be what they would call, with the Christian charity that distinguishes them, a "bad woman." Those are the quite immaculate ones, whose white robes such as you and I can scarcely presume to touch. There are a few, I am glad to say, who will continue to believe in you, whatever you do. But even they might not all be able—much as they would regret it—to go on calling upon you. You see, in this world we have to be so careful about what other people

THE YOKE

may think; they might possibly misinterpret our high-minded motives. There is something due to ourselves, you understand; we must never forget ourselves.

So you must be cautious, dear. Nothing will your own sex, at any rate, less easily forgive than the raising, ever so little, of that chafing collar. Married women and elderly spinsters you must particularly beware of. It is they whose silence is virulent, whose "charity" a careful compound of noxious subtleties. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at. They themselves have suffered from their sex. They have known the struggles, perhaps the fright; but with a little luck, perhaps without, they have come through the danger zone. And when it comes to the turn of another, *don't* they have their revenge.

I know a lady very gentle, very sweet. If you should meet her, you will agree with me. One day she heard that a little maid-servant had been dimly suspected of making some poor tentative attempt to ease her neck. The change in her was startling. With heart and eyes and voice as hard as Pharaoh's she exclaimed, "She shouldn't have been kept a day." And yet that same lady had

THE YOKE

retained in her service for months a woman known to be a thief and a liar.

Oh, you matrons! You comfortably married matrons! Whenever I hear a remark of that sort, I think of a temperance lecturer with a private bottle of spirits behind the scenes, with which to refresh himself in the intervals of his oratory.

Angelica was still standing by the window, whither the vivid thought which flung her from her seat had carried her, when she heard the door open. She turned her head and saw Maude enter. Angelica was surprised to see her look so composed.

But that is the miracle of marriage. Men and women still throbbing from passionate scenes can join a breakfast-party and talk unconcernedly of current events. Day after day there is that going on in millions of homes which stirs human beings to their utmost depths, and yet—on the surface—non-existent. It is a very wonderful thing. It is not always understood how wonderful it is. Here is this world and all the superficial things of it, the things we talk about and work about and spend our lives about; but underneath—hardly recognised, hardly hinted at—is the deep unchanging power which moves it all.

THE YOKE

Maude, on her part, however, saw signs in Angelica which did not speak of composure.

"Why, what is the matter, dear?" she asked anxiously. "You look as if—"

"Do I?" said Angelica. "Perhaps I have. Is there any law which forbids it?" she asked, smiling.

The other waited and studied her friend through serious brown eyes.

"Will you tell me?" she asked. "Can I help you?"

"You can't, dear," said Angelica.

Maude was puzzled. What could Angelica—Angelica who had apparently everything she could wish for; adequate means, a comfortable home, freedom from care, years that hung lightly on her, an attractive personality and a sympathetic nature that made her universally beloved—what could Angelica find to weep about?

"Tom will be down directly," she said presently. "He is unpacking. We had such a lot to tell each other."

Angelica said nothing.

CHAPTER VI

AMONG the first-fruits of Maurice's promise to Angelica was an acceptance of Grahame's invitation to spend the ensuing week-end at Haslemere. He knew that, to keep going on the new lines, he would have to break the monotony of life wherever he saw an opportunity. Moreover, now that Angelica had the Cunninghams to keep her company, he was denuded of even the semblance of an excuse for refusing.

It cannot be said, for all that, that he approached the business with any exuberance of spirits. He looked upon it very much in the sense of a duty, due indeed principally to himself, but also in a minor degree to Angelica and to Grahame. He had strung himself up to the point of undertaking it, and he meant, if he could, to go through with it creditably.

Such was his condition of mind as he sat in the railway carriage opposite Grahame and stared out of the window at the slowly-moving birch woods,

THE YOKE

while the train laboured up the long hill from Guildford.

When a place has long been known by report but never seen, the mind necessarily forms some picture of it, often quite arbitrarily, upon which to project its thoughts. So vivid may this become that, even after the place has been actually beheld, the imagined form of it sometimes returns to the brain in place of the reality. Maurice without the least foundation had conceived Mrs Grahame's house as a bright, many-gabled, lattice-windowed modern building, partly pebble-dashed and sham-timbered, backed by pine woods and approached by a new road. Consequently, his ideas needed considerable reorganising when Grahame led him to his mother's actual residence.

It stood in the main street of the village, its long side flush with the pavement—so flush that the lower windows demanded a series of short muslin blinds, to screen the rooms from the casual eyes of pedestrians. It was neatly painted and cared for, though the old red brick showed some signs of decay. The side facing the street was prolonged by a high brick wall, which guarded a leafy garden. This garden extended in an L shape to the back of

THE YOKE

the house, where there was an open view of the heather and pines. At the point where the wall joined the building proper, the former was pierced by a narrow archway, blocked with a green door. You passed through this and along a short flagged path to the main entrance, which faced the garden through a lattice porch.

On entering the house, Maurice was met by an unexpected indulgence. There were no immediate signs of his hostesses. Grahame seemed to be equally gratified, though for a different reason.

"The old people may be asleep," he said below his breath. "If we could manage to see Cecil alone for a moment we should get to know what line to take."

He cautiously opened the library door and looked inside. Finding the room empty he was about to close it again, when he was struck by a thought which took him up to the newspaper rack. He ran his hand over three *Queens*, the last Christmas number of the *Graphic*, several *Quivers*, and innumerable copies of *Weldon's Practical Needlework*. With a slight laugh at this unprofitable find he came away and looked into the

THE YOKE

dining-room. That also was empty. Then he crossed the hall and, with even greater precaution, peeped into the drawing-room. He pushed his head further inside and looked round the corner. Then he flung the door wide open.

"All out, apparently," he said, resuming his ordinary tone. "Well, come in, Heelas."

He caught sight of a maid descending the stairs. "Is Miss Grahame out?" he said to her.

"Yes, sir," replied the maid. "She went out about three o'clock with Mrs Grahame and Miss Gaskell. They expected to be back before you came, sir."

Grahame turned back into the drawing-room. "That means meeting them all in a bunch," he said to Heelas. "We must make the best of it."

Then, as the maid was disappearing, he shouted again to her. "Jane."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring me all the newspapers that haven't been burnt."

"*All* of them, sir?" said Jane.

She wasn't surprised, neither had she failed to hear. She repeated the request without any reason whatever; an irritating habit which from

THE YOKE

some men would have provoked a sarcastic reply. But Grahame was not of that type.

"Yes, every one of them," he said briskly, "and as quickly as you can."

She returned presently with four copies of the *Morning Post*; or, rather, with three and a portion, for the fourth had evidently done partial duty as a fire-lighter. There was also the previous Saturday's number of the *Haslemere Gazette*, carefully preserved in the kitchen after the less important organs had gone the way of all newspapers.

"Now," said Grahame, sitting down with the papers on his knee, after the door had closed behind Jane; "it was Monday night, wasn't it? That would make it Tuesday morning. So it would be in Wednesday's paper." He went through the pile. "Monday's—that's no use; Thursday's—a bit of it—the advertisement sheets; all Friday's, and"—he picked up the last—"Tuesday's." He looked up with a whimsical smile.

"Are you sure?" said Heelas.

"Look at them yourself, old chap." He tossed him over the pile. "There are three things that may have happened to it," he went on sagely; "Cecil may have it; the Mater may have it, to

THE YOKE

produce quietly when she thinks it expedient; or it may have been burnt in the ordinary course. I should say the chances are about equal all round."

He got up and stood with his back to the fire, one hand in his pocket, the other on his hip, and looked down amiably at Heelas, as the latter turned the papers. His face expressed the comprehensive good-will which made his nature so lovable. The next moment he gathered up the papers from Maurice's knee and placed them under a couch with elaborate stealth. There were voices in the hall. He opened the door and went out.

"Hello, mother!" Maurice heard him say. "Frolicking about as usual! I never knew anyone like you."

There followed a quick twitter of female voices, slightly breathless and expostulatory, but pitched in a tone—so he thought, with relief—indicating the very best of spirits.

Then came the expected incursion—which Maurice awaited in the centre of the drawing-room carpet, in an attitude which he devoutly hoped might represent, but which he was painfully conscious did not, graceful ease: two elderly ladies,

THE YOKE

still breathless and bonneted, accompanied by Grahame. In these Heelas had no difficulty in recognising Mrs Grahame and her sister, Miss Gaskell. Six years had changed them very little. Both were then, as now, slight and brisk and white-haired (Miss Gaskell, as became a spinster, perhaps a little the sligher and brisker of the two), both were pleasant-featured. He was to learn too, presently, that they could each of them still talk as volubly as ever upon subjects in which he would experience the same difficulty as of yore to become absorbed.

You may be inclined to think, perhaps, that they had rather a slow time of it up at Haslemere. At once disabuse your mind of any such impression. They were merry, these elderly ladies; oh, but they were giddy! (in a strictly pious and decorous way). Dear me, the tea-fights and the whist-drives (they occasionally included a representative of the male sex), the bazaars and garden-parties, such fun and frolic as never was! And the good works they did amidst of it all! Their circle of friends was remarkably extensive. Some of them, they were obliged to admit, were a little peculiar in their ways. The Haslemere people, it

THE YOKE

may be interjected, for the benefit of those who do not know it, are the sort who go in for high art and the simple life, and affect slovenly dressing, and furnish their houses with gimcrack severity. But though our two ladies did not omit to subject these details in private to adequate comment and criticism, they prided themselves that in general principle they were sufficiently broad-minded to glance over them with becoming charity.

Mrs Grahame played the leading *rôle* on all occasions, by virtue of her matronship, and also, if the truth must be told, by virtue of her purse-strings. Indeed, they were real good souls; but one had been unfortunate, and the other failed to recognise the sacrifices her sister was making for her. (And what sacrifice can an amiable spinster lady make greater than holding her tongue?) Their father, a man of sanguine temperament, had died before the commercial enterprises in which he had launched his capital had sufficiently developed to affect the death duties. So his married daughter was left dependent upon her husband, and his unmarried one upon that personal possession which was the only endowment of a certain milkmaid of nursery-rhyme. Unfortu-

THE YOKE

nately it cannot be denied in the face of bald fact—whatever the aspersion cast upon the gallantry of mankind—that this was a property which had not proved of a freely negotiable character. Consequently, when her sister was left a widow, she readily acceded to the latter's request to lighten her bereavement by making her a long visit—a visit which was steadily developing into permanent residence, if, indeed, it had not already fairly earned that description, having lasted nearly seven years. The arrangement involved the tacit condition, which we have hinted was perhaps not quite adequately appreciated by Mrs Grahame, that she should be willing largely to efface herself and to play a complementary second fiddle. So far as was consonant with that, she shared with her sister the joys and cares of her position and her household. Both, as we have seen, were enthusiastically alive to neighbourly and social obligations, both were high authorities in all that concerned domestic service, both took a deep interest in the welfare of Cecil and a deeper one in that of Christopher.

Mrs Grahame came quickly up to Maurice with outstretched hand.

THE YOKE

She was full of apologies for not having been in to greet her guest; but, really, Mrs Joppling had been so hospitable, and Mr Joppling had been so full of anecdote, and Miss Cameron had made them laugh so much, that the time had slipped by before they realised it. Miss Cameron was Mr Joppling's niece, and such a nice girl, so jolly and bright. It was a pity that— (Here an unhappy passage in Miss Cameron's history was parenthetically suggested in a tone parenthetically subdued.) Finally she welcomed Maurice very warmly to her house "in the wilds." She added facetiously that in a household of lone women a gentleman was especially *persona grata*.

Miss Gaskell also said (when Mrs Grahame had quite finished) that she was very pleased to meet him again, and what a pity it was that he didn't come oftener to Haslemere. The handshake with which she accompanied this sentiment suggested almost boisterous *camaraderie*. If Maurice had supposed (it implied) that he was likely to find her a crotchety old maid he must forthwith correct his ideas.

The prolixity of these various remarks gave Maurice so long to think of a satisfactory rejoinder,

THE YOKE

that he found the task unexpectedly easy when the time came. He couldn't follow Mrs Grahame in her encomiums of the Jopplings and their connections, never having heard of the Jopplings before; but he said that it was his own loss not to have been to Haslemere hitherto, and that he had no idea there was such beautiful country so near London. Which sentiment, he gathered, from the smiles with which it was received, was quite the right one to express.

Then they all sat down; and the ladies at once pleasantly included Maurice in the family circle by untying the strings of their bonnets and removing them. It was only mid-April and there was a bright fire in the hearth, but the sun had been exceptionally powerful that day. Mrs Grahame thought so, at any rate, and Miss Gaskell was of the same opinion. They had both noticed it particularly, they said, hurrying home from the Jopplings.

Maurice's glance wandered round the bright chintz-covered furniture, and out through the long French windows to the spring tints in the garden, and finally rested on a clump of pine in the distance. It came back the next moment to Mrs

THE YOKE

Grahame, whose voice demanded him; but he furtively drew a breath of relief. It might have been much worse. If this had been all, he would have been almost happy. But through everything that had taken place—the greetings, the explanations, the final settlement to ordered peace—he had been conscious that his ordeal was not yet over. Indeed, the most dreaded part of it remained to be faced. The Daughter of the House (he thought of her in capitals) had still to make her appearance.

Her delay puzzled him, and for a time it had given him a fluttering hope. There might be some afternoon and evening engagement, promising at any rate a temporary respite. But his ears, kept eagerly open for some possible support of that delectable hypothesis, not only received none, but were finally ruthlessly smitten by the chance announcement that the lady of too-certain age was actually in the house. He had visions of her arraying herself with increasing splendours, in order to make her eventful appearance completely dismaying.

The door opened. His heart jumped, but he kept his attention politely riveted on what Mrs

THE YOKE

Grahame was saying, and then turned his head quite quietly. He believed he knew something of young ladies. But if he could possibly help it, he did not think this one would have the slightest reason to suppose that he was in any way impressed or moved by her magnificence. However, it was only the maid with the tea. It was placed on a small table by the window; and still the stage waited.

The calm—not to say the indifference—with which the others awaited the approaching incursion seemed to him almost offensive. Mrs Grahame was telling him a merry yarn. He retained considerable portions of it, and felt sure he would be able to comment intelligibly if a pause occurred unexpectedly. Furthermore, he fed the incidental hope that this sprightly mood was inconsistent with the private possession of Wednesday's paper. Miss Gaskell was an interested and appreciative listener to the story, which she had heard a dozen times before, and occasionally punctuated it with an explanatory observation in an unobtrusive tone. Grahame was looking through the "Travel" replies in the *Queen*, wondering whether he should go to Paris or the Engadine for his next holiday.

THE YOKE

Each and all, in short, were behaving precisely as if there were no apparition momentarily liable to burst upon the peace.

Then, while he was still feeling the vague resentment which flowed from this condition of affairs, the apparition was externalised. That exactly expresses the effect. He had not heard her enter. Merely he became aware that a tall and slender young lady, with something artistic in her air, was present in the room, was, in fact, coming across it remarkably gracefully.

CHAPTER VII

No one would have thought of calling Cecil Grahame pretty. The word would not have been in the least appropriate. She might have been said to be exquisite. The whole suggestion was of delicacy; her features clear and rather pale, very finely wrought in an oval outline. Her fair hair swept across her brow in one loose wave. It appeared to Maurice to be commendably simple. We, who know better, know that it was the art that conceals art.

"I'm so sorry," she said. The natural culture that was part of her being inflected her voice. "There was a letter I had to write before post-time. Aren't you going to say 'How-do-you-do' to me, Chris?"

"Tea has only just come in, dear," said Mrs Grahame, after Christopher had adequately recognised his sister's existence. "You remember Mr. Heelas?"

She extended a slender hand and smiled pleasantly and naturally.

THE YOKE

"If Mr Heelas remembers *me*," she said. "Otherwise my memory will become shocking."

Maurice realised instinctively that the attitude of polite indifference which he had intended to adopt towards her was unnecessary. She was plainly without the least suspicion of affectation. So he actually allowed his dark eyes to dwell upon her amicably, and brought himself to say,—

"It's very jolly to meet you again."

Whereupon Cecil made a mental note that he was remarkably good-looking, and a further one that he didn't know it. Moreover, when she had taken her place behind the tea-things, where she always officiated, and Maurice had resumed attention to Mrs Grahame's diverting story (Mrs Grahame's stories were never suffered to lapse through interruption—they were merely held temporarily in abeyance), she gave him a longer and more comprehensive look than she had ever bestowed on him in his boyhood days. Incidentally she tried to connect this calm and refined and rather shy person with the ferocious young gentleman whose wild exploit was recorded in the sheet of a newspaper reposing in the bottom drawer in her room.

THE YOKE

Presently the conversation became general, and Christopher got up lazily to hand the tea, dropping the *Queen* with a flop beside his chair. His truck with it was not extensive. It consisted of a careful perusal of the "Travel" replies, a passing glance at Miss Hoare's beautiful women, and a hasty run through the advertisements, on the chance of discovering something particularly pungent.

"You might be holding my lump in, Cecil," he said, as he took two cups.

She looked up with inquiry and slight expostulation. "Holding it in, Chris?"

"You know, I told you. I've got past the actual sugar stage; but I like a lump held in for a minute or two and then taken out again."

This aroused general protest, as being beyond the reasonable duties of the dispenser of tea. Even Mrs Grahame, though it evoked her mirth, took sides against her son.

"My dear boy, you really can't expect Cecil to do that for you," she said.

"Well, you see, mother," said Christopher, "it's really my misfortune in not having a taste to fit the only size that lumps of sugar are made. Will you have muffin, or what?"

THE YOKE

"I rather agree with you," said Cecil, with her calm smile. "Loaf-sugar should be graduated or made in smaller blocks."

She fished out, not without patient search, a broken piece and dropped it in his cup. It is an operation by no means ungraceful when the operator has a light and dainty hand; a conclusion which Maurice, somewhat to his own surprise, was sufficiently observant to arrive at. Cecil did not overwhelm him and close him up, as some of her sex did; she was too natural to do that. He felt with regard to her as one feels on entering an exceptionally polished and pristine hall, that an unusually protracted communion with the door-mat is demanded, and that, even so, it is insufficient. A sum in simple addition made her barely twenty, but he found it extraordinarily difficult to accept its evidence. She seemed so very much at her ease, so utterly self-possessed, so quietly elegant, so graceful, so cultured. She made him wish he could look in the glass to see if his hair were tidy. He wondered also if "awfully jolly"—an expression he had just used—was really admissible in a drawing-room.

After tea the two elder ladies picked up their

THE YOKE

bonnets and gloves, and various small paraphernalia they had brought in their hands, and beat a quiet retreat. A silence, attributable partly to reaction after their vivacious conversation, and partly to the knowledge of a somewhat difficult subject unbroached, succeeded their departure.

"I suppose," said Christopher, presently, drawing his chair closer to the fire, "I suppose you don't happen to know, Cecil, what has become of Wednesday's paper?"

There was a slight pause. "I know where one sheet of it is," said Cecil, calmly.

Both young men sat forward in their chairs, and, after deciding that the fire needed prodding, Christopher said, "Where?"

He had taken the poker in his hand, but he suspended it for the reply.

"In my bottom drawer upstairs," said Cecil. "It was too bad of you, Chris," she went on quickly. "If mother had seen it, she would never have got over it. I've been on thorns ever since, lest somebody should tell her. This afternoon I found out from Muriel Cameron that the Jopplings knew."

THE YOKE

Christopher attacked the fire with boisterous energy, and the operation gave Maurice an opportunity to look at himself through untinted spectacles, in the light of Cecil's protest. It required those rays to show him the essential selfishness of their exploit. He was the first to speak.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Grahame," he said. "We were thoughtless imbeciles."

"Oh, it really didn't matter very much in your case," said Cecil, turning to him. The frank penitence in his face confirmed that note in her mental memoranda and added another. "Mother has rather prim ideas, poor dear, and she is too old to change them. Angelica would understand—or 'Miss Jenour' I suppose I ought to call her now."

"She will always be 'Angelica' to me," said Chris, dropping the poker and standing up, "and nothing else."

"I haven't asked after her," said Cecil. "I used to love her in the Cumberland Square days, and I'm sure I should still. Everyone does. It would be delightful to see her again."

"Well, Cumberland Square is still in existence," said Maurice, "and Angelica still lives there. She

THE YOKE

seems just the same to me as she did six years ago, and I think she would to you."

He wondered, after he had got into bed that night, if the words amounted to an invitation.

"Do you remember the day we all went to the Zoo together?" said Cecil, becoming reminiscent. "Chris insisted on riding on the elephant, so Angelica took him. I knew perfectly well at the time that she didn't much want to, and I've often felt for her since. I wouldn't ride on that ridiculous animal, before all those staring people, however much a noisy little boy might clamour."

"Did I do that?" said Chris. "Just like me. I know the kind of hateful little imp."

The reminiscence provoked others, which succeeded one another so pleasantly that Maurice forgot, for the time being, at any rate, that the environment was not such as his soul loved, that he had come to the house from a sense of duty, and that he cherished a well-grounded and ingrained antipathy to young ladies.

When eventually they made a move to dress for dinner, Christopher lingered a moment behind with his sister.

"Cecil, you're a brick," he said.

THE YOKE

And Maurice, who was waiting in the hall, knew that he put his arm round her and kissed her.

The older ladies wore black at dinner, but Cecil appeared in a soft pink amalgamation of silk and lace, and looked calm and elegant. Her clothes were made to hang rather loosely upon her, not in a slovenly or careless manner, nor yet with a loud proclamation of high art, but with simple grace and good taste.

During the meal there were several passages which appear worthy of some reference. To begin with—or, rather, after the removal of the fish—Grahame had a fore-quarter of lamb placed in front of him—calmly, deliberately placed in front of him without explanation or apology. He looked at it with speculative interest for a few moments, as a professor might view an unfamiliar biological specimen, and then candidly burst out laughing.

Mrs Grahame glanced round the lamp a little anxiously.

“What’s the matter, Chris?” she said.

“The matter!” said Chris. “Well—” His explanation got no further, the sight of the thing in front of him again becoming too much for his gravity.

THE YOKE

Mrs Grahame got up, laughing, and trotted round to the other end of the table. She wanted to take the carving-knife, but that was an indignity which Chris would not suffer. He sent it away ostentatiously to be sharpened, while his mother explained the usually accepted methods of dealing with the problem before them.

"My dear mother," he said, "you must begin at the beginning. I don't even know what it *is*; I don't know what animal it comes off."

So Mrs Grahame began at the beginning; and the matter becoming presently a trifle involved, chiefly through Chris's interruptions, Miss Gaskell also rose from her seat, to lend such additional assistance as lay in her power. Cecil, who made no pretence to be an authority, took no actual part in the discussion, but she leaned forward and watched the proceedings with quietly interested eyes, and lips hovering on the brink of a laugh; and occasionally interjected a remark to correct an obvious verbal flaw. Maurice was left for the moment in splendid isolation at the other end of the table.

Eventually the maid returned with the knife. Chris gave it his approval. And so, with Mrs

THE YOKE

Grahame on one side of him, pointing and instructing, and Miss Gaskell on the other, also pointing and instructing, and a maid standing ready with a spare dish, the shoulder was finally removed in triumph and carried away amid the plaudits of the company. After that achievement it was a rudimentary business to sever the remainder into such portions as could be placed upon plates without public scandal.

Mrs Grahame returned to her seat, a little flushed, and quietly reverted to the subject she was discussing with Maurice before this incident—namely, the extreme heat of the previous summer. It had tried her severely, she informed him. She thought there was nothing more trying than excessive heat. The perpetual thirst that accompanied it was so difficult to bear. But that trouble, it appeared, had latterly been much assuaged by the discovery of a remedy which gave great relief.

"I don't know if you know it," she said. "If you don't, you should take a note of it: the juice of a lemon mixed with honey and a little cinnamon. A teaspoonful quenches the thirst almost immediately."

THE YOKE

Maurice said he was sure it must be very effective and that it was kind of her to tell him about it.

"But, good gracious, mother," exclaimed Christopher, who had caught her last words, "you don't expect a man to waste a thirst on a teaspoonful of lemon syrup!"

Mrs Grahame looked at him a little severely. She didn't care to have her pet specifics guyed, even by Christopher. For a few moments there was rather an awkward silence.

"I found it very comforting even in influenza," said Miss Gaskell, dutifully coming forward to fill the breach. "Have you suffered much from influenza, Mr Heelas?"

Maurice thought he had had it once, but he wasn't sure if it hadn't been only a bad cold.

"Oh, you couldn't mistake it," said Miss Gaskell, solemnly. (Maurice realized that he had treated a serious subject far too lightly.) She went on to detail the symptoms, with special relation to their manifestation in her own case, which Maurice gathered had been in some respects abnormal, and as such found peculiarly interesting by medical men. This involved some correction by Mrs Grahame

THE YOKE

of alleged small inaccuracies. ("I think it was only 101 on the *first* day, Carrie dear; it was on the *second* you were 102.") And so the matter of the lemon syrup was safely bridged over.

The subject of influenza reminded Miss Gaskell of an amusing incident which had happened to a lady at Bournemouth. But this was a tale which Mrs Grahame knew also. She intervened gaily and continued it, Miss Gaskell quietly dropping out. Maurice laughed heartily, so did Cecil, so did Miss Gaskell. Mrs Grahame was pleased, because, as she remarked, she liked to see people merry. She said she thought a good laugh did one all the good in the world. It had always seemed to her that it was a real misfortune to lack a sense of the ludicrous. One gathered that she herself had been happily endowed by Providence with a peculiarly keen susceptibility in that respect.

Later in the evening, during dessert, she remembered a story with a moral. She had a way of remembering stories with morals when the day was far spent. The story was not a long one, but the moral was. It was the longest moral Maurice had ever heard. In delivering it, Mrs Grahame did not look at her audience, but down at her small

THE YOKE

ringed hands, which were fingering the remnants in her dessert-plate; and she spoke in low, level tones, quietly but didactically. She was one of those persons who believed implicitly in the value of the spoken word and never stuck at voicing things.

Once Maurice completely lost the thread, and went hot at the thought that she might stop suddenly and expect him to reply. But the even tones flowed on. Then it occurred to him that, although she had begun by addressing him particularly, she was now directing her remarks to the company at large. And on looking round, he observed that this was a fact which the company at large sufficiently recognised. All were looking more or less uncomfortable and trying not to show it. Christopher was leaning back in his chair gazing at the ceiling, with an appearance about his lips suggesting a strong but restrained inclination to whistle. Cecil was making patterns on the inside of a piece of orange-peel with her fork. Miss Gaskell's countenance expressed reverent assent, in front of a little—a very little—boredom.

It was evident that Mrs Graham conceived herself to be executing a duty; not an agreeable one,

THE YOKE

perhaps, but for that reason all the more demanded of her. Weaker souls might have shrunk from speech; but she was not weak. There were three young people at the table, and it was necessary to their well-being that certain matters should be kept prominently before them. What better time, surely, for such a purpose, than during dessert, in the calm of the evening?

However, all things must come to an end, even stories with morals. Mrs Grahame brought her exordium to a close amidst an impressive silence. After a discreet interval she quietly rose and withdrew with the other ladies, pleasantly conscious of a task well done.

Maurice closed the door carefully behind her. And, the meal being thus concluded,—

“For these and all His mercies,” said Christopher, piously.

CHAPTER VIII

"HAVE a cigarette, Cecil?"

"I really don't care about it, Chris."

"Well, don't do it to please me, my dear girl," said Chris, cheerfully. "I honestly think I would just as soon you didn't."

He passed the cigarettes to Maurice, then took one himself and closed the case. Having carefully placed an ash-tray between himself and Heelas, he stretched himself out on a wide, comfortable-looking sofa and pulled a copy of the *Sporting Times* from his pocket. For the moment, however, he resisted the temptation to read it in the face of his visitor.

"What's going to be done this afternoon?" he asked impersonally. "Such a fine day—it seems a pity to stay indoors."

This was Sunday afternoon and they were sitting in the apartment which, in his mother's presence, Chris called vaguely "the other room," and, out of it, "the smoke-room," and which she herself referred to as "the library." There was, in

THE YOKE

fact, some little difference of opinion in the matter. Chris contended that "library" was ostentatious and misleading, while Mrs Grahame took the not unreasonable ground that "smoke-room" was an inappropriate name for a room which was only used as such on her son's occasional week-end visits. Accordingly the question remained in suspense—so far, that is, as the household generally was concerned. Mrs Grahame regarded it as finally settled, and alluded quite freely and without apparent difficulty to the "library" in the hearing of the objector—in the latter case, indeed, perhaps a little more freely and incisively than otherwise.

The room which supplied the bone of contention was furnished in a slightly out-of-date but comfortable fashion; tall mahogany bookcases, a pedestal writing-desk, leather-covered armchairs a little worn, a Turkey carpet a little faded.

No one replying to Christopher's remark, he launched the proposition to which it was designed as introductory.

"I have been thinking," he said, "that if Heelas took my bicycle you could show him some of the country, Cecil." He unfolded the *Sporting*

THE YOKE

Times and laid it on his knee. "I would come myself," he explained, "but of course if I did you couldn't have my machine, Heelas." He was evidently comfortable as to the incontestable soundness of his excuse.

Just at first Maurice had no misgiving. The arrangement seemed patently out of the question. He expected Cecil to laugh it off, as the ingenious artifice of a lazy brother. Then, to his horror and amaze, he saw that she was seriously considering it, that, in fact, she was going to agree. For a moment a wild thought of firmly refusing to deprive the reclining and obviously "settled for the afternoon" Christopher of his bicycle shot into his brain. The next, the gross discourtesy to Cecil of such a transparent subterfuge was apparent. He pulled himself together. If the thing had to be gone through he must make the best of it; though what he was going to find to talk about, for two or three hours, to this elegant and fashionable young lady, he hadn't the faintest conception.

"Imagine Chris being inspired with such a practicable idea!" said Cecil. "How long has it been evolving, lazy-bones? I'm quite agreeable." She didn't realise in the least that she was dropping a

THE YOKE

bombshell. "What do you say?" she asked, turning to Maurice.

He was quite aware that she consciously avoided his surname. She had used it once or twice during the last twenty-four hours, though not without some difficulty. In fact, he had been a little surprised to find that the family with one accord had elected to promote him to that dignity since he last had intercourse with them.

"I'm not much of a performer on a bicycle," he replied, with an attempt to laugh. "It's some time since I rode one. But I hope I shouldn't disgrace you."

He didn't succeed in hiding his reluctance so completely that it failed to reach Cecil's intelligence. She attributed it to its right cause, but it made her flush just perceptibly.

"The machines are in a shed behind the house," said Chris, becoming restless. "Cecil will show you." He fingered the pink paper affectionately.

"Oh, then I'll go and see if they want pumping up," said Maurice.

The next move rested with Cecil, but she hesitated to make it. Her emotions were a little mixed. They included some pride, but also a cer-

THE YOKE

tain sympathetic recognition of Maurice's readiness to take his diffidence by the horns.

"You might take him over Hindhead," said Christopher, to whom this hitch was a trifle perplexing. "You get a good idea of the country from the top."

"Very well," said Cecil at length, but rather slowly. "But I must change my dress first. I won't be long." She was standing near the window, looking out, and she added, as if in excuse for her action, "How lovely it is!"

"Yes, it's a lovely afternoon," said Chris, enthusiastically.

He drew a long breath of candid relief as the door eventually closed behind the other two, leaving him at last in a position to turn his attention to the *Sporting Times*.

During the inevitable adjustments which precede every cycle excursion (Cecil's front tyre was down and Chris's saddle needed lowering) there seemed some reason to fear that Maurice's misgivings as to the conversational product of the outing might be fulfilled. Neither of them was naturally loquacious, and the beginning had not

THE YOKE

been auspicious. Constraint had raised its chilling head, making them both conscious that, even in the practical references to nuts and tubes, they were engaged in the distasteful business of "making conversation."

Matters mended, however, when they started. Bicycles, in such circumstances as these, have one very distinct advantage over any other means of locomotion in that they provide frequent excuse, if not actual necessity, for keeping otherwise than abreast. During the twists and turns, the ups and downs, through Haslemere and Shottermill, they were too much engaged with the management of their machines to have been able to talk, except in quick exclamations, even had they wished. Thus, by the time they reached the long ascent of Hindhead and were obliged to dismount, they had bridged the worst and were able to take their association in some degree as a matter of course.

Cecil showed her companion, as they passed them, the houses of the various notabilities that stood on the hillside. A popular publisher lived here; there was the abode of a distinguished oculist; there again was the famous stockade erected by an eminent scientist to keep his neighbours at arm's

THE YOKE

length, neighbours who persisted in hustling him on this wild forest-land he had thought to make his own. Near the summit was the house of the novelist who had given the world *Micah Clarke*, and with that enthralling story revived the historical romance. Finally there was the hill-top—the very “hill-top” which had inspired and seen the productions of the novels which bore that title, though the hand which had penned them would write no more.

These were all things which Maurice found genuinely interesting; so much so that, as they neared the end of their tedious walk, he was talking naturally and even animatedly.

“Did you ever try to write?” asked Cecil.

“Nothing but opinions on cases,” he replied with a laugh, “and those Counsel usually turns into his own words before they go to the client.” He paused and became momentarily pensive. “Except three verses once,” he added honestly.

Cecil turned a quick glance on him. “To a lady?” she inquired.

Maurice flushed slightly. “Well, none that I ever spoke to,” he said.

“Will you show me them?” asked Cecil.

THE YOKE

"Good gracious, no!" cried Maurice, horrified, "even if I hadn't burnt them, which I have, long ago. Which way are we going?"

They decided to take the Farnham Road, and almost immediately had begun the swift, exhilarating three-mile freewheel. Shouting something, Cecil whizzed past Maurice, a white flash of floating drapery. Less experienced both with his machine and of the road, he took the descent more cautiously. For all that, he was distinctly under the impression that he was "letting her go." His hubs hummed and the air met him with a cutting rush. But a receding speck at the other end of an occasional straight stretch was all the glimpse he got of Cecil until he reached the bottom. There he found her dismounted and waiting for him by the "Pride of the Valley," a little flushed, but quite composed and elegant.

"Safe and sound?" he said, jumping off and looking at her. "I'm awfully glad. But you make me feel rather like a lame duck."

"Oh, I'm very foolish," admitted Cecil. "But I never can resist that hill, and it makes my fingers ache to hold the brakes."

At this point there was a choice of four routes,

THE YOKE

each looking equally tempting. After a little hesitation they continued towards Farnham, proceeding sedately along a level road bordered by pine and birch. Cecil kept glancing at a sequence of small lanes that ran into the main highway from the left.

"I feel sure that if we took one of these bye-roads," she said, "we should come out on the Frensham Road. We could get home from there. It would be better than going back the same way."

"I'm quite willing to make the experiment," said Maurice. By this time he was becoming enthusiastic of the gem-like scenery, which was continually breaking upon them in some new phase.

So they wheeled round the next turning. It led them beside a high garden-wall and then through a pine wood. Up to this point it was rideable, with care. But out of the wood they emerged upon a wide upland of heath, rising to a considerable height, and the road became a mere sandy track worn among the heather. They dismounted and looked at one another, and both voted without hesitation for advance. There was a romantic suggestion in the prospect; too enchanting to be left unpursued.

THE YOKE

"It can't be very far," said Cecil.

They pushed their machines to the top of the hill, and then paused to take breath. Over on the other side, at the distance of about a mile, was the main road to Frensham. It was a mild afternoon; and Maurice, for his part, felt lazy. It was uncommonly pleasant up here. He glanced at his companion tentatively. *Could* Cecil Grahame sit on the heather? The thought seemed to border on the irreverent; but, even as it passed through his mind, he saw her drop her bicycle and sink lightly on a small hummock.

"I *must* rest," she said. "Besides, it's so lovely here."

Immediately below them was a small lake, lonely and quite still, fringed on two sides by the pine wood they had come through. It was seen across the heather, which surrounded them on all sides and struck the eye, at this time of the year, less by its purples than by its cloudy greens, which merged eventually, with wonderful continuity of effect, into the deeper cloudy greens of the pines. Mixed with it was bracken and a little gorse; and, ringing all, trees, mostly evergreen, trees innumerable, over hill and valley, as far as the eye could

THE YOKE

reach—not disfigured, but rather enhanced through contrast, by the red roof of a house, just protruding, here and there. Behind them—it seemed a great way off—the summit of Hindhead lifted itself conspicuously out of the surrounding country.

Maurice breathed his relief and dropped down gratefully beside Cecil. It was pleasant to relax his limbs. There appeared to be no need to talk; solitude and scenery blot out conventional necessities. He removed his cap and let the light breeze flow through his hair; then pushed back the wisps on either side of his brow—a futile habit, since they immediately fell forward into place. In the course of these proceedings he realised, somewhat abruptly, that he was enjoying himself.

“Don’t you want to smoke?” said Cecil, presently.

He did, but he hadn’t dared to ask. Cecil even rendered assistance in screening the wind while he lighted a cigarette. Really, she was becoming wonderfully human; and the remarkable thing was that he accepted her as such quite calmly. He sat with his knees drawn up and his hands loosely folded across them, and quietly surveyed the scene in front of him.

THE YOKE

"It's really very pretty," he said meditatively, with the studious care of youth to avoid committing itself to too great raptures. "It makes me feel almost ashamed not to have seen it before. I've been to Italy and to Norway. And this is only forty miles from town."

He spoke because he was moved to, not for the purpose of "making conversation."

"Does that mean you will come again?" asked Cecil.

Maurice continued to gaze at the little lake, through his rising smoke wreaths, with an absorbed expression. "That depends whether I'm wanted or not," he said.

A few hours earlier he would have answered the same question by "I hope so," or "I shall do my best," with the private intention to leave the matter at that.

"Of course you will be wanted," said Cecil, turning upon him with sudden animation. "What an absurdly modest creature you are! Do you think we have all changed into frigid strangers in the last six years?"

Maurice turned his head and looked at her.

"You have changed," he said, with a slight ac-

THE YOKE

cent on the pronoun, and the next moment was struck by the audacity of the subject.

"I have added an inch or two in height," said Cecil, smiling. "That was scarcely within my control."

"I don't mean that," said Maurice.

"And I have put my hair up and let down my frocks," continued Cecil. "Do you object to that?"

"Something more," he persisted.

"Well, what?"

She flattened her palms on the heather on either side of her, leant back on them, and looked at him.

"It's very difficult to explain," said Maurice, picking at the feathery stalks between his knees. "It's awfully cheeky of me to have begun the subject. Do you mind?" he asked suddenly.

"I shouldn't ask if I did. I want to know."

He knocked the ash from his cigarette, then abruptly met her glance. "You have matured altogether," he said, almost hurriedly; "grown more unapproachable somehow. For instance, I have become 'Mr Heelas.' "

"Would you prefer to be 'Maurice'?"

THE YOKE

"I'm more used to it," said he.

Cecil sat up and smiled whimsically. "Young ladies—" she began. "I'm a young lady, you understand?" she interjected.

"I know that," said Maurice. "That is precisely the point."

"Young ladies," proceeded Cecil, "in things of that kind have to follow the lead of their natural guardians. We are not expected to think or act for ourselves. It is all laid down in the great social ordinance. You mustn't blame me for the absurdities of a code which I don't believe in but have to obey."

Maurice lighted a new cigarette from the stump of the old one and returned to his contemplation of the scenery. Many young men, similarly situated, would have playfully begged for at least a temporary and experimental return to the familiar method of address. Perhaps Cecil would not have been entirely displeased had Maurice done so. Haslemere, for all its natural charm, was not precisely a stimulating centre of existence, and Mrs Grahame's circle of friends, in spite of their conventional culture, were remarkable neither for their youth nor originality. Some foolish, trifling badi-

THE YOKE

nage with a handsome youth might perhaps have served as an alleviating interlude. But all she could detect in Maurice's profile was a mind which had passed naturally from a subject not worth discussing. His calm abstraction slightly—very slightly—piqued her.

"You ought to have been an artist," she said presently.

He turned his head. "Why?" he asked.

"You look like one."

Maurice laughed. "That's a woman's reason," he said.

"Of course it is. What a foolish thing to say. Besides, you are interested in beautiful things."

"I admire scenery," he admitted.

"So you are glad I made you come?"

"*You* made me come!" said Maurice.

"Well, perhaps it was Chris. But you didn't very much want to, did you?"

She was smiling; but Maurice flushed. He felt indignant. "I don't think it's fair to say that," he said.

But Cecil was inexorable. "Did you?" she repeated.

THE YOKE

"No, I didn't."

"But you're glad you came?"

He dared to hesitate.

"You're glad you came?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, don't be cross. And pull me up, please. It's time we were going." She held out two slim gloved hands.

When they had descended to the road Maurice looked at his watch and announced that it was nearly five. Almost at the same moment they came to a sandy bye-road, where was a large board, directing—by means of a finger pointing down the pleasant, leafy recesses of the lane—to the Frensham Pond Hotel, and incidentally referring to the numerous advantages to be derived from a temporary sojourn there. The course was obvious. They went to the hotel, and had tea in the verandah overlooking the larger lake.

The romantic situation made Maurice suddenly expansive.

"When a gem of an inn!" he said. "Do you know what strikes me about it?"

"No," said Cecil, pulling off her gloves; "unless that it would make a good subject for a painting?"

THE YOKE

"That it would be an ideal spot to spend a honeymoon."

"I didn't know you knew there *were* such things," said Cecil, witheringly.

They went back through Churt, avoiding Hind-head by a long *detour*, and arrived home about half-past six. They found Christopher in the garden, pretending to weed a rose-bed.

"Hello, you two!" he said. "You've missed tea."

"We've had it," said Cecil, "at Frensham."

"*Bona-fide* travellers!" He dragged out a long string of chickweed with the hoe, from a place where it wasn't visible, and left it in another where it was. "Did they make you swear an *affidavit*?"

"What have *you* been doing, Chris?" asked Cecil, innocently.

"I hung about," said Chris. "The afternoon slipped away. I almost fancy I must have gone to sleep."

CHAPTER IX

MAURICE's visit to Haslemere was the precursor of others. The ice once broken, it became a pleasure to go there. During the heat of the London summer, especially, it was an unquestionable asset—this invigorating upland where one could revive. Once or twice Angelica accompanied him, to the great joy of Mrs Grahame and Miss Gaskell, who found her an exquisite listener. There is nothing strikingly heroic in being such. Yet she had been born with no greater aptitude than you and I, reader, to listen attentively to wordy moral platitudes or intricate stories about people she did not know, or to pass unchallenged didactic opinions with which she was not in sympathy, but which it would have served no purpose to impugn. She had simply the faculty of discovering quickly what would give others most pleasure, and adapted herself by the knowledge with unconscious selflessness.

So the elder ladies monopolised Angelica's company on the occasions of her short visits. It was

THE YOKE

an arrangement which was found decidedly tantalising by Cecil. Sometimes she felt almost angry with Angelica for her complacency. True, she was at liberty to sit in the drawing-room as long as she wished and to listen, with Angelica, to her mother's discourses. But that was not precisely what she wanted. She would have liked to have taken her up to her room and kept her there an hour or two, to have shown her her clothes and talked to her, alone and unimpeded, of the hundred and one things which a girl yearns to pour into responsive ears. In her childhood she had always found it possible to open her heart to Angelica far more unreservedly than to her mother. Instinctively she knew that she could do so still. But Mrs Grahame talked on, and Miss Gaskell punctuated, and Angelica listened, and Cecil fretted.

If Angelica herself shared these feelings in any degree, no one was permitted to suspect it, not even Maurice. Her hostesses, at any rate, had no reason to believe, and certainly they did not believe, that she found their society any less delightful than they found hers.

As a consequence of this renewal of friendship,

THE YOKE

however, Christopher and Cecil, twice during the season, spent two nights at Cumberland Square and "did" theatres. Then, indeed, Cecil was able to revel in a sweet waste of intimate confabulations. Her affection for Angelica grew into a kind of worship, such as a younger woman not uncommonly gives to an elder whom she trusts and admires. She had the most profound respect for her judgment in all things, and her somewhat independent spirit was almost enthusiastically willing to be guided by the elder woman's calm advice. She would wait anxiously for Angelica's verdict on some point of feminine difficulty and became quite exultant if it favoured her hopes.

"Don't say I was wrong, Angelica," she would plead; "don't, if you can possibly help it."

Angelica's answers were always quite impartially given; but as Cecil's actions and opinions were guided by a pretty sound and clear intuition, it happened that they usually coincided with her wishes; a circumstance which I am not prepared to say—for Cecil was undeniably human—was uninfluential in the development of her homage.

Their most intimate, most thoroughly enjoyable and satisfactory conversations took place late at

THE YOKE

night, when respectable people, such as you and I and Mrs Grahame, would be asleep in our beds.

"How those women chatter!" said Chris to Maurice, sitting in the morning-room one night after the theatre and listening to the continuous murmur of voices in the room above them.

"I suppose we appear to be doing the same to them," said Maurice, who was eating a sandwich. "I've often noticed, when you are not in the room and can only hear voices, you get the impression that people are talking a heap more than you do when you can follow the words."

"Yes, very likely," said Chris. "When you think about it, two people sitting together are generally saying something. Jove, what a funny thing it is that there should always be something to say—always. Up there, for instance—whatever it is, it wouldn't matter if they didn't say it—but they *are* saying it."

"How do you know it wouldn't? What do you suppose they are talking about?"

"Clothes," said Christopher, without hesitation.

"Angelica wouldn't talk long about that," said Maurice, decidedly.

"Well, she is always well dressed."

THE YOKE

"So are you, but you don't talk about it."

"Oh," said Chris, "a man who talks about his clothes—!" Words failed him to express his abysmal contempt. "Love affairs, perhaps?"

"Angelica!" said Maurice, in astonishment. "Oh, no. Not her own, at any rate."

It was on the tip of Christopher's tongue to put a leading question on the subject of Angelica's history. But he was a youth of delicate perception, and it occurred to him—as it had occurred to him on similar previous occasions—that it would possibly fail in taste. So he kept silence.

"And I don't suppose your sister has any," concluded Maurice.

"Well, the neighbourhood is not quite congenial," observed Chris, thoughtfully; "the doctor is married, and so is the parson, but the Mater knows two retired colonels, who are widowers. She says they are awfully funny fellows, but I don't think Cecil has a sense of humour. We'll say the play, then."

Maurice finished his sandwich and lighted a pipe. "*We* stopped talking about that a quarter of an hour ago," he said.

"And what has been the subject since?"

THE YOKE

"Them."

Christopher helped himself to another sandwich. "Us?" he suggested.

Maurice blew a ruminative cloud of smoke—not uncharged with pleasant fancy. Things had pushed on a little since that first bicycle ride, recorded in the last chapter. There had been other rides, and opportunities of conversation apart from rides, in the course of which he had discovered unexpected traits in Cecil. She had no objection to "awfully jolly." In fact, you could talk to her as you were accustomed to talk to other people; perhaps even more easily than to some—Mr Kenyon, K.C., for example. Her horizon extended considerably beyond the commonplace and the obvious, and included in its broad sweep perceptions almost daringly advanced. There were times, indeed, when she still seemed somewhat empyreal and unapproachable, as, for instance, when she came down in the evening dressed for the theatre—on which occasions he had to keep on reminding himself that it was the same person who sometimes sat on the heather—but he had long ago found out that she was not the artificial and self-centred "young lady" of his imagination. Over and above

THE YOKE

all this—as inducing to his proper appreciation of her—it had begun to dawn upon him, considerably to his surprise, that she gave signs of no especial aversion to the society of Maurice Heelas—a small item of knowledge which encourages the self-esteem of the best of us.

So his mind dwelt not ungratefully upon Christopher's last conjecture. But he decided to be sceptical. "I don't think it's the least likely," he said.

"What will you bet?" said Chris.

"Sixpence," said Maurice, cautiously.

"I never plunge," said Chris.

"Not often."

"Honestly, I haven't betted, Heelas, since I dropped that fiver on Cat's-eye. I don't think it's fair to the Mater. Well, let us say half-a-crown. You can't object to that. You ought to lay me odds."

"Right you are," said Maurice. "I'll soon find out."

He jumped from his seat and ran half-way up the first flight of stairs.

"Angelica!" he called.

He had to call again before Angelica opened the

THE YOKE

door. She was wrapped in the thin, pale-blue dressing-gown, whose loose folds, edged with deep lace, fell to her feet.

"We want to know what you are talking about?" said Maurice, calmly.

"What!"

Angelica came slowly forward, smiling her astonishment. As she did so, Maurice was suddenly struck by her beauty. It had never impressed him in the same way before. It was only, indeed, since the night of their memorable conversation after his encounter with the police, that he had been able to see in her a being capable of possessing physical beauty. Since then he had recognised it, but at no time quite as now. There was something in the grace and dignity of her carriage, as she came slowly forward, something, too, in the soft contour of her neck and cheek, which made him thrill with admiration.

"To settle a silly dispute," he said, changing instinctively his off-hand tone.

"Why, what rubbish have you been talking about?" said Angelica, half laughing.

She leant over the balustrades and pressed upon them to speak to him, unconsciously displaying the

THE YOKE

tender moulding of her woman's form. Maurice received a species of shock. This was Angelica—no beautiful stranger, but Angelica, with whom he had lived for nearly twenty years. Angelica, whom he had never seen till now. The remembrance of her gentle confession flowed through him like wine, as he looked up at her, bending towards him—gracious, supple, very womanly. He seemed to have no other sense than vision. He hadn't heard what she said. For a few moments he stood and gazed at her foolishly, then took his eyes away with an effort and abruptly turned and began to descend.

"It doesn't matter," he said huskily. "Never mind, Angelica."

"But—stop," cried Angelica. "Stop. I'll tell you, Maurice." She looked through the open door beside her. "What *was* it, Cecil? What were we talking about?"

"Mr Bernard Shaw," replied Cecil, from the bedroom.

"Mr Bernard Shaw," called Angelica down the stairs.

"Mr Bernard Shaw," repeated Christopher, in the morning-room. "Then I pay."

CHAPTER X

Now, during these months—the months that followed his first Haslemere visit—Maurice had honestly kept faith with Angelica. That is to say, he had not put himself into the way of temptation—or, to put the matter more accurately, he had given himself no chance of yielding to the temptation within him. That must not be regarded as suggesting that there was anything vicious in his composition. We have set up so austere a standard in these days, that the mere possession of human instincts may quite possibly be condemned as evidence of vicious proclivities. I firmly believe that even eating, if it were not necessary to sustain life, would be arbitrarily catalogued as a vice, solely because it is capable of conferring a certain amount of physical pleasure. A great deal of confusion results from the slovenly use of terms. One sees references to the “instinct of cruelty” and the “instinct of revenge.” Those are vices. There are only two instincts implanted in humanity; one is to sustain life, the other is to per-

THE YOKE

petuate it. All others, so called, may be brought under one of those heads. There is nothing immoral in either of them. Particularly they include the appetites. I fearlessly assert that there is no vice in the temperate gratification of *any* appetite.

Maurice was interested in his profession and anxious to succeed in it. Stirring visions came to him at times—usually while he was lying awake in bed—of Maurice Heelas, K.C., leading in a *cause célèbre*. Occasionally, when he was quite alone, he would put his right foot on a chair, rest his right elbow on the raised knee, and extend his right forefinger, with the hand palm uppermost. On those occasions he conceived himself to be wearing a silken robe, which made a pleasing sound as he rustled—a little late—into the front bench. Then he would straighten an imaginary wig with his left hand, and slowly wag the extended right, to point a series of penetrating questions, which would leave a recalcitrant hostile witness in a condition of stuttering and helpless confusion. Phrases made memorable by famous cross-examinations stuck in his mind—"Would you be surprised to learn—?" and "Pull yourself to-

THE YOKE

gether, Mr Pigott." There didn't appear to be anything particularly brilliant in them; he believed he could invent others equally striking—even (the thought seemed to border on sacrilege, and came, so to speak, below his breath)—even more so. He placed no limits to his wings. Sometimes, listening in the Courts, he became justly indignant with eminent Counsel because they neglected to make obvious points—points which, as he had clearly seen from the beginning, their whole cross-examination was directed to bring out. There were no such omissions in the cases he conducted in his bedroom. Every point was clinched, hammered, driven firmly and relentlessly home; until the most eel-like witness became a mere pitiable object, upon whom the judge looked solemnly and the jury cast glances of scarcely-veiled amusement. He could hear the slight murmur of spontaneous applause (instantly suppressed) amidst which he would resume his seat, and could sympathetically appreciate the thankless office confronting his "learned friend" who would rise to re-examine.

"And now, sir, will you kindly explain to his lordship and the jury how you reconcile that in-

THE YOKE

teresting admission with the precisely contrary statement you made ten minutes ago?" He would have reached some such thrilling moment as that, when the saying about "castles in the air" would recur to him. Then the chair would be kicked aside in disgust, he would straighten himself soberly, and the whole realistic histrionic exercise would be branded, summarily and contemptuously, as "tomfoolery." Possibly it was. Yet there is little ambition if there are no fairy fancies; and many a castle in the air has come eventually to be built on solid ground. The youth who has dreams and is prone to histrionic exercises in his bedroom may be safely expected to go further than the one who tramps stolidly along, absorbed by the day and the mediocrity thereof.

By this time Maurice had passed his final examination for the Bar, but he was not eligible to be "called" until another year had expired. In the meanwhile, he employed his time in watching cases in the Courts, and by a diligent attendance at the chambers of Mr Kenyon, K.C., to learn the practice. Had he been less in earnest about his work he would probably have been tempted to "slack" this portion of his career.

THE YOKE

He was under no authority which could have been effectually exercised, and he had not to look forward to his profession as a means of livelihood. But he knew that it was no use to have dreams if you were not prepared to go through the mill. No man, however great his abilities, ever reached a position of eminence, in any walk of life, who had not done his share of hard work.

Thus, by the time the Courts rose in August, he was able to enjoy a holiday with a good conscience. He went to Norway first, with two fellow law students—enthusiastic fishermen like himself. Afterwards he joined Angelica, who was visiting in Scotland. Towards the end of September they returned to town together.

It was then, as the long autumn evenings stretched into winter, that Maurice felt, in dead earnest, the steady pinch of his promise to Angelica; or, to lay the blame in its proper quarter, of a social system established in callous disregard of natural law. Hitherto the demand of the forces within him had been spasmodic and temporary; fierce while it lasted, but possible to be overcome and forgotten. Now it began to lie on him heavily and continuously. Day after day in

THE YOKE

the midst of all the affairs of life, he was conscious of a tremendous, underlying necessity—constant, unrelaxing—to *live*, to have done with restraint, to take his hand off the brake and run freely into the open plains of Eden.

It was not to be expected, perhaps, that he could accept this condition of things with a complacent spirit. It seemed to him to be a wanton and avoidable affliction. A physical malady he would have submitted to philosophically, as part of the human heritage. But this was not a malady. On the contrary, it was a condition of vigorous, effervescent health. He asked nothing of Providence but to be allowed to live calmly, to do his daily work undistracted, to lay, unhampered, the foundations of his future. That was not permitted him. Man born of woman, he was stung by the call of sex.

Angelica, who was constantly anxiously on the watch for signs of restlessness in him, recognised what he was going through with acute distress. She racked her brains for means to vary his life. They dined in town and went to theatres, lunched in town and went to picture-galleries; on Sundays they made long expeditions into the country; she

THE YOKE

encouraged him to have the Grahames and other friends to the house, and to return their visits. Maurice entered into these diversions with spirit. He was as anxious as Angelica to bluff his senses into quietude. But the underlying necessity was not thereby induced to take its departure. Moreover, Angelica herself—she may or may not have suspected it—had become an unsettling influence, especially since the night when she had appeared on the landing in her dressing-gown. They played tedious games of dummy bridge; but he saw her soft, fair neck and shoulders across the table. And her gently-moving bosoms spoke to him with her words, "I have not won them yet."

The climax came one evening in early November. They were sitting in the morning-room. They had finished their game at bridge, and Maurice, after cursorily glancing at the evening paper (which he had already read), had thrown it down beside his chair, and for some time had been staring rather gloomily into the fire. Suddenly he got up and, without speaking, went out of the room. He returned in a few minutes with his coat on and his hat in his hand. He was rather pale, but his face was set.

THE YOKE

"I am going out, Angelica," he said, in a voice that was obviously steadied with difficulty. "Don't sit up for me. I may be late."

Angelica rose slowly and turned towards him. Her face had blanched and was drawn with sudden pain.

For a moment she was silent, unable to speak. Then she said, in a low voice, "Where are you going, Maurice?"

He could not look at her. It was harder even than he had expected. "I shall go and find Grahame," he said huskily. "We shall probably go to the Empire. We may—" He hesitated, then grappled with himself and finished almost fiercely, "We may make a night of it. I promised to tell you."

"Oh, Maurice—*must* you?"

There was exquisite volume of appeal and distress in the tense, low tones. She took a step towards him.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Angelica, don't look at me like that," he pleaded. He didn't misunderstand her, nor pretend to. "I've tried—I've tried hard—for your sake. I wish I were made of anything but flesh and blood. I wish I were made of

THE YOKE

wax and wool, sawdust, shavings, anything, anything. "Yes," he said, low, but quite clearly. "Yes—I must."

Angelica was outwardly calm now. Her face was still pale, but the strained lines had left it.

"Try a little longer, dear," she urged softly.

"What's the use?" said Maurice, looking away. "One can't go on. Now or a month hence—what difference can it make?"

It was her own thought—the comprehension of inevitableness which had followed the flush of relief when her first fright had proved to be groundless, and which had never left her. "Some woman, sooner or later." But she tried to forget it, tried to trample it under.

"You may marry," she said. "That is what we are told to do." She felt the vanity of the words, as exemplified by her own case, even as she uttered them.

Maurice turned his eyes upon her. "Marry!" he said.

"It is the recognised means of meeting these difficulties."

"Marry!" repeated Maurice, almost with de-

THE YOKE

rision. "Why, I haven't even been 'called.' Besides, I'm not in love."

"You may be soon." She came quite close to him. "Maurice dear, try, for my sake, to be brave a little longer. Try, try."

Maurice bent his eyes upon the ground. He was very much moved. "You've been awfully good to me," he said. "It's horrible to hurt you. But it would be no good to promise what I couldn't carry out. I know I couldn't. Do you understand, Angelica? It's every day—every hour almost. I don't want it—this craving—I hate it—but it *won't* be driven away—it *won't* let me alone."

She laid her hand gently on his arm. "Poor boy! I know." The words fell on his ears very softly.

"But—but—" she cried suddenly, straining her hands in a convulsive clasp, "I can't let you do this, Maurice—I can't bear it."

Maurice looked up a little reproachfully. "I don't think you are quite fair to me," he said.

"I know," she said, "I know I only asked you to tell me—to promise to tell me. I said that should be all. You have behaved quite honestly,

THE YOKE

Maurice. But—but—I thought— What did I think? Oh, wait—wait—let me think!"

She had fallen back a pace and dropped a hand heavily on the edge of a table. Maurice made a movement to her assistance, but with the other hand she motioned him back firmly.

She was keeping control of herself only by a powerful effort of will. Under a calm exterior she was deeply agitated. She must come to a decision now and irrevocably. The thought which had hovered over her mind as a vague possibility during the last six months must be squarely faced as a concrete question, to be answered once and for all in the next few minutes. There was one way to save Maurice—one only. The yoke that had lain heavily on her all the days of her womanhood, that even now was bearing upon her—that yoke could be broken.

She had carried her own burden so long that she had become used to its weight. It was difficult to conceive herself relieved of it. Had there been that alone to be considered, she would unquestionably have gone on carrying it. She was prepared, against her judgment, but in accord with custom and convenience, to live out her

THE YOKE

artificial life. She knew that if Maurice executed his purpose and closed the front door behind him, she would be maid, not at forty only, but at fifty, at sixty—if she lived so long—to the end of her days. She would die without having lived, duly complete her allotted span in opposition to Nature, having faithfully carried out the arbitrary will of man.

It was not her own feeling which had power to influence Angelica, as she stood with her hand on the table, her features set in the calm of exerted will, her grey hair massed in deep waves about her head—well as it might have done—not the certainty of what Maurice would leave behind were he to close the front door; it was the fear—the accumulated, poignant fear—of that which he might meet ahead.

“Don’t think I am doing this,” he said, speaking earnestly, “because I expect to find pleasure; or because I wish to. It’s not that. It’s because I *must*; because life is impossible otherwise.”

“Think of the danger you run,” said Angelica, still leaning upon the table. Her words came with difficulty. “I want you to think of that.”

THE YOKE

"I don't forget," said Maurice. "It's a risk one has to take."

"Perhaps for a lifetime, Maurice," pleaded Angelica, "utter breakdown, utter ruin, utter misery."

"I can't help it," cried Maurice. He took a step back into the hall, with a sudden determination to end the interview. "It's as bad to drag on. I can't work. I can't sleep. I'm mad. Angelica, I *must* go."

He was moving to the front door. In another moment it would clang behind him. The fact burst upon Angelica with a flash of realisation, as though there had been no preparation. She started after him to the door of the sitting-room. In that final second she had made up her mind.

By a supreme effort she forced herself to speak quietly. "No," she said. "Stay. You sha'n't suffer. Stay."

CHAPTER XI

MAURICE closed the door of the morning-room. It seemed unfamiliar to him. He had the feeling that he had never been in it in his life before. He laid his hat and coat on a chair mechanically.

Angelica had sunk into a seat and bowed her head in her hands. She was trembling. The same violent agitation had seized her as when the Cunninghams had unconsciously made her cognisant of their happy reunion. She had riven the yoke, and every strained muscle was still quivering after the effort.

Maurice gazed at her through an atmosphere of unreality; and suddenly he felt mean—utterly, despicably mean. He had driven her to do something she did not wish to do. In the queer mist that had enveloped him he wasn't quite sure what it was; but whatever it might be, she did not wish to do it—he knew that from her attitude.

Then, all at once, she looked up. The strain and stress had vanished; she was calm; she was smiling. More than that, there was something in

THE YOKE

her face he had never seen there before, nor in any other woman's—something new and delicious—a slightly quivering light in her soft grey eyes. It made him thrill. With a bound of the heart he realised the subtle change that had taken place in their relationship. Hitherto foster-mother and child, guardian and ward; they were now man and woman, as they had stood in Eden.

"Come and sit here," she said—"here, very near me, and let us talk."

He obeyed quietly. He seemed to be walking on air.

"Maurice," she said, after a slight pause, "do I seem to you to be *very* old?"

"Good gracious! *no*," cried Maurice. He forgot for how short a time he could have replied so emphatically. "Old! You are perfectly lovely, Angelica."

Angelica blushed slightly with pleasure. "I used to be good-looking," she said, "years ago. But now I have grown grey-haired—and you are so young." She looked at him a little pensively.

"I'm twenty-two," said Maurice; "a very long way from the nursery, dear." He bent towards her.

THE YOKE

"What did you say?" said Angelica.

"A very long way from the nursery," repeated Maurice.

"I thought you said something else?"

"So I did," replied Maurice, stoutly.

"I like you to say it," said Angelica; "I'm glad." She paused. "Tell me this: have you ever looked upon me as anything but a sort of mother to you?"

Maurice hesitated.

"Have you?" repeated Angelica.

Suddenly he slipped from his seat, knelt beside her, and took her two hands in his. "Yes, I have, —often, often."

Angelica drew in her breath. She closed her eyes and dropped her head on the back of the chair. A shiver went through her. The rings on her fingers bit into the flesh. Then, opening her eyes, she spoke very low, "Could I make up for—for those others?"

"Make up for them? Make up for them?" Maurice repeated the words in a sort of hushed whisper, hardly daring to push them to their uttermost meaning. Then, with a gesture of complete self-abasement and homage, he pressed

THE YOKE

his lips upon the white hands that lay within his own.

He got up. "Forgive me," he said. "I've been a brute. I don't know what I've been thinking of."

Angelica didn't look up. "You don't understand," she said.

"Yes, I do," exclaimed Maurice. "I know that you are willing to sacrifice yourself to save me. You've brought me up, cared for me, devoted yourself to me all my life—which I've never half returned, never half appreciated—and now, to keep me from harm, you are ready to do even this. Oh, I can't say what I feel. I feel so utterly, horribly little! and you are so splendid."

"It's not a sacrifice," cried Angelica, almost passionately. "I should have less compunction if it were. I want it. I want it more than anything in earth or heaven. But—but— Oh, I'm not sure, I'm not sure." Again her hands went over her face. And she shook.

Maurice stood perfectly still. For a while he could not fully grasp the wonderful thing that was happening—had happened. Life seemed to have

THE YOKE

opened a new heaven and a new earth. A paradise undreamt-of lay before him.

Then, in a voice which came from within him, though he hardly recognised it, he said, "Why, Angelica? Why are you not sure?"

"Whether it is right," said Angelica. "Whether we ought to allow ourselves to do this."

Abruptly Maurice found himself. The utter joy of it, the transcendent happiness that had suddenly come to be his—that was poured at his feet like golden pieces—flooded and surged through him.

"I *know* it is right," he cried. "I don't care for all the books that ever were written, or all the sermons that ever were preached—I *know* it is right."

Angelica removed her hands. She smiled at him a little. "Perhaps the wish is father to the thought," she said. "Come back here, where you were before." She pointed to the place on the carpet where he had been kneeling.

Maurice obeyed her. She laid her hand on his smooth dark hair and gently stroked it.

"Will you despise me forever?" she said.

"Despise *you*, Angelica!"

THE YOKE

"I suppose many men have said that," returned Angelica, quietly, "in just the same tone. And yet they *have* despised."

"Men are horrible," said Maurice.

"Is this one horrible, I wonder?" She separated strands of his hair with her fingers. "Not now. But will he some time be?"

Maurice stretched out his arms till his hands met behind her waist.

"Oh, Angelica, do believe me," he pleaded.

She was in evening dress. She could feel his breath on her bosom.

"I think I'm going to try to," she said. "No, not yet." She pushed back his eager face. "Will you always be true to me, always be content with me, never again seek to endanger your health and your career and your self-respect, never, never become one of those who can make a trade of the tenderest of human ties?"

"Yes," cried Maurice, straining towards her; "a hundred million times yes."

"You know what you are saying? You know what you are promising?"

"Yes," said Maurice again, firmly, deliberately. A moment more she held him at arm's length,

THE YOKE

and looked deeply into the ardent, handsome face which was framed between her palms.

Abruptly she dropped her hands. "Then you may kiss me," she said.

Maurice paused at the gate of Eden to give a happy laugh. "Why, I've often kissed you before," he said.

"But not as you are going to do now," said Angelica.

With sudden abandon, her arms went out and over him. Her eyes were shining. "Oh, my dear! my dear!" she cried. All the might of her pent-up womanhood filled the reiteration of the two little words.

Maurice drew her firmly to him and kissed her on the mouth. Then, slowly, his lips travelled downwards, lingered over her neck and shoulder; and stayed there.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN people are happy there is little to tell of them. And for the next few months Angelica and Maurice were very happy. Indeed, lest that phrase should be misleading, we may inform those of our readers whose hearts may prompt a friendly concern in their welfare, that their lives have continued to run to this day in peaceable channels. Their respective courses have not been unaffected by certain extraneous events; but of those in due season.

This, of course, is not at all as it should be. However unusual a book may be, at least it is expected to align its eventual teaching with established thought. The author is painfully conscious that, in being happy after so grievous a deviation from accepted modes, Angelica and Maurice quite fail to meet standard requirement, and that in recording the fact he is seriously presuming upon the public patience. They should have come to an early death or dragged out the remainder of their existence in suitable misery. That is the invariable experience of books. But it is not—and we may

THE YOKE

thank God for it—it is not the invariable experience of life.

Deeply, therefore, as he regrets the pain the statement must bring, he is compelled, as a conscientious narrator, to record that these two people were in sober truth supremely happy. Angelica steadily recovered her health and spirits. She was relieved of anxiety for Maurice, and her own personal and physical circumstances were wonderfully improved. Her sound constitution, in spite of so many years of unnatural conditions, responded vigorously, now that the check on normal development was withdrawn, and gave her not only glowing health but rejuvenation. Beyond that, she was conscious of a lively mental exaltation. Her life was no longer meaningless, the reproach of enduring maidenhood was removed, she had fulfilled her destiny, she was a woman.

The perception of all these changes became exquisite, however, only through the knowledge, which each day made clearer, that Maurice was benefited to as great an extent as herself by their new relations. The fits of depression, of moroseness almost, which had begun to grow upon him, passed away. He felt like a man who had been

THE YOKE

shackled to a heavy weight, and who suddenly finds the chains snapped and himself free of the incubus. It was very sweet to Angelica to watch his gradual return to a natural and healthy state of mind, to note the new and vigorous enthusiasm which he put into everything he took up. He would come home at night, fresh from some battle of wits in the Courts, and unfold his ambitions with frank, boyish ardour. She did not check them, only attempted to order them into logical sequence. She believed in his future; but she did not lose sight of the probable difficulties and disappointments he would have to encounter. It was at this period that Mr Kenyon first began to take that practical interest in his career which led eventually to his employing him to "devil" in his chambers.

Even their games of "double-dummy" lost their old characteristic tedium. They laughed over one another's mistakes like a pair of babies.

"Oh, I say, Angelica, you've trumped your own trick!"

"May I take it back?" said Angelica.

"Certainly not. Good gracious! you won the last two rubbers!"

THE YOKE

"Then I must have played brilliantly," she retorted gaily, "because you've had all the honours."

"Merely ornamental," said Maurice, referring to the stake.

"I don't think they are at all ornamental," said Angelica, surveying the scoring-block with a smile, "unless you can contrive to make better figures."

Maurice amended a few of them. This was in the middle of a hand.

"By-the-bye," he said, tapping the block with the blunt end of his pencil, "what *are* we playing for?"

"Not for love," replied Angelica, laughing, "unless you'll let me take that card back."

"Twopence-halfpenny?" suggested Maurice.

"It will be heads I win and tails you lose, if we do," said Angelica, "because I haven't got a purse, and I really can't go and fetch it now."

"All right," said Maurice, dropping the pencil, "nothing."

Which, it may be remarked parenthetically, was their customary stake. Neither of them had any of the gambling spirit. Occasionally, rather by way of a joke, or if there were others at the table to whom it was a condition of enjoyment, they

THE YOKE

played for something exceedingly mild, and, in the case of one another, settled up if they happened to have the necessary coppers. The question of the morality of a pecuniary stake at cards is one which is being perpetually canvassed. Probably its very continuance is due to the fact that no general answer is possible. It depends as much upon income as upon temperament. If there is a consciousness of excitement produced by the desire to gain, it is undoubtedly vicious. One has to discover the extent to which one's worldly means or native cupidity make it possible to go without such excitement. Few people, probably, can play bridge innocuously for more than fivepence a hundred.

Angelica yawned during the next hand, and at the conclusion of the rubber she said it was after eleven and that she was going to bed. Maurice sprang up from the scoring-card as she was moving to the door.

"You are always in such a hurry," he said.

He kissed her; then put both his arms round her and spoke in her ear.

"A week!" cried Angelica, with a quick laugh. "Forty-eight hours. Yes—yes—the night before last. Your arithmetic is getting shocking, Maurice;

THE YOKE

you'll have to go back to school." Suddenly she took his face between her hands and kissed him fondly.

A few mornings later—it was in December—Angelica came down with an open letter in her hand. It was from Mrs Grahame; and its gist, when finally extracted, was the announcement of the intention of the writer and her sister to redeem an old promise by spending a day at Cumberland Square—a promise so old that Angelica, for her part, had forgotten all about it. Mrs Grahame's letters were characteristic, however, so we will beg the reader's indulgence to transcribe this one in its entirety:—

"MY DEAR ANGELICA,—You will be sorry to hear that my dear Annie (Miss Gaskell) has been suffering severely of late from what we supposed to be *neuralgia*. After vainly endeavouring to relieve it by home remedies we called in Dr Bryce, who prescribed a *tonic*. She took it for more than a fortnight without, I am sorry to say, the *least alleviation*. He now thinks it well that she should see a *dentist*. Living in the wilds here, as it were,

THE YOKE

shut off from all sources of information, it has been very difficult to select a really *reliable* man. The one I have been accustomed to visit I have completely lost confidence in. He stopped a tooth for me two years ago *most unsatisfactorily* and caused me *needless pain*. Therefore I applied to Dr Bryce for advice. He has suggested a dentist in Brook Street, of whom he speaks in high terms. I feel very nervous at being obliged to be guided by second-hand information in a matter so important, but I really should not have felt satisfied to allow my sister to go to a man who had *bungled* in my own case. Our appointment is for Thursday at 11.30. Annie is very plucky, and would have been willing to go alone. But, though one naturally shrinks from the ordeal, I feel it my duty to be with her at a time which under any circumstances would be very trying, and especially so in the case of a *total stranger*. Should you be in town on that day we should like afterwards to pay you our too-long-deferred visit. We should reach Cumberland Square (D.V.) a little before one, but I am afraid I should have to beg to catch the 5.55 train home, as I find I am very liable to take cold if I stay out late at this time of year. I hope you will not

THE YOKE

shrink from providing lunch for two people who may be *ravenous* after an early breakfast. We all send our cordial love.—Yours affectionately,

“CAROLINE E. GRAHAME.”

“It finishes with the very best skittish,” said Maurice, to whom Angelica had been reading the letter at the breakfast-table. “Luckily she’s not here; so we don’t have to laugh.”

“You shouldn’t make fun of her, Maurice,” said Angelica; “she is very earnest and quite sincere. I really don’t know if it would be fair to let her come.”

“Why?” said Maurice.

“She would be so terribly upset if she *knew*.”

The sequence of ideas induced in Maurice by this observation could be followed by its outward effect; first a contemplative smile, then a broader one, finally an outright laugh of sheer enjoyment.

“She *would*,” he said profoundly.

In the end Angelica, in spite of herself, was obliged to smile too.

“But how can you get out of it?” said Maurice, jabbing for a ball of butter.

“I hardly know,” said Angelica. “I suppose

THE YOKE

one could manage to be out of town that day. There are lots of people I ought to go and see."

Maurice slowly spread his butter on a piece of toast. "I don't think you need carry conscience to that extreme, Angelica," he said. "I don't suppose there's anyone in the world much less likely to contaminate the old lady than you."

He took a bite out of the toast and at the same moment happened to catch Angelica's glance, and was surprised to find that she was regarding him with eyes moist with mute acknowledgment. It is a poor comment upon mankind that, when a woman has bestowed the utmost she can upon one of them, she should be continually on the alert for signs that she is losing his respect, continually grateful for evidences that she is not. And it would probably make little difference to her to be told, what is perhaps a platitude, that respect which is capable of being withdrawn in such circumstances is emphatically not worth having.

Reassured by Maurice's decided opinion, Angelica dismissed her scruples; with the result that at a quarter to one on the following Thursday the two ladies duly arrived. They were in good spirits,

THE YOKE

but suffering from slight winter indisposition, manifested by a quantity of wraps, subdued but rather insistent coughs, and, in Mrs Grahame's case, by a mysterious private preparation which she introduced into her food. The first part of their visit was occupied by a full and precise account of their interview with the dentist. This was conveyed to Angelica, it may be scarcely necessary to state, through the medium of Mrs Grahame. She related verbatim, and without undue haste, what the dentist had said, what Miss Gaskell had said, and what she herself had found it advisable from time to time to interject. She carefully recapitulated—to bring Angelica up to date—the first rough impressions which had been exchanged in the cab on the way to Cumberland Square, and then proceeded to give judicious tongue to the further considered impressions which were now available. Incidentally she touched gracefully upon Miss Gaskell's fortitude in trying conditions; remarks which Miss Gaskell listened to in deprecatory and slightly embarrassed silence. Having thus put Angelica on a level with themselves, the subject could of course be discussed in its various bearings with mutual enjoyment. Its ramifications were by

THE YOKE

no means exhausted when they descended to the dining-room.

Angelica gave them champagne at lunch. She was very fond of it, so was Mrs Grahame, so was Miss Gaskell; and they all said so. Some people say they are not fond of champagne, that they look upon whisky-and-soda as infinitely preferable; they are slaves to custom—when custom puts it on the free-list. Under its genial influence it became possible at length to change the subject. By the end of the meal it had drifted to servants; a subject which Mrs Grahame treated with fluency and with many dubious shakes of her head. Her pessimistic view was strengthened by a recent experience of her own. Angelica gathered that she had been obliged to dismiss one of her maids in distressing circumstances. It appeared she had been seen, as late as half-past eight at night, in a lonely lane, in the company of a member of the other sex. That was of course a situation which called for prompt and decisive action on the part of Mrs Grahame.

Angelica said she was sorry she had been so inconvenienced. "But I think sometimes," she added, "we are inclined to be rather harsh with

THE YOKE

our servants. There are always two sides to a question."

"My dear, there can only be one to *that*," said Mrs Grahame, solemnly.

Miss Gaskell was also understood to express the view, in slightly different terms, that there could only be one to *that*.

Angelica said no more. She knew the inutility of words in certain circumstances—indeed, in most.

They returned to the drawing-room. Whereupon the two visitors produced work-bags, from which they extracted coils of knitting. They were making woollen vests for the Haslemere Guild of Needlework. They said (through Mrs Grahame) that they thought everyone should always have some occupation; that time was too precious to spend in idleness; that it was not the purpose for which we were put upon earth and given hands. Their hostess's hands at the moment were empty; of which Mrs Grahame was quite aware.

Angelica accepted the quiet rebuke and procured some fancy-work. Then she looked at the clock—without sighing, without any outward token of weariness, without, indeed, any inward recognition that she felt, or was likely to feel, weary. Still,

THE YOKE

she looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to two. Tea was at four. Two hours and ten minutes of solid, uninterrupted conversation! Angelica bent her head to her work, and asked if Christmas was bringing a great many social festivities at Haslemere.

Festivities accounted for the first half-hour; some friends of Mrs Grahame, whom Angelica had met once, many years before, occupied the second. Then Angelica rose and changed her seat. The second seat was no more comfortable than the first, nor was it any better placed; simply the necessity for movement of some kind had become imperative. She glanced out of the window. The square wore its accustomed atmosphere of peaceful dignity—in the grey winter afternoon it amounted almost to solemnity. Two ladies were leaving a house on the north side; otherwise it was empty. If only she could have walked once round it—once to the church and back again!

Her visitors did not appear to find it at all irksome to sit in one position a whole afternoon; they worked placidly and talked placidly, and were enjoying themselves thoroughly. Mrs Grahame, seeing Angelica looking out of the window, said

THE YOKE

how much nicer it was to have an open space and trees to look upon, rather than merely the opposite side of a street. Then she asked if their old house was occupied, and by whom. Then she launched upon a sea of reminiscence. This was punctuated by subdued sighs or by amused, semi-pensive laughs and "Oh, dear, dears!" according to the nature of the resurrected matter. Angelica found herself here upon more favourable terms. The conversation quite frequently referred to things in which she had taken a personal interest. She reminisced, and Miss Gaskell reminisced. She joined in the mirth and echoed the sighs; and in this pleasant revelry the afternoon gradually wasted away. At four o'clock came tea. After tea came Maurice.

He had hurried home on purpose to see the visitors from Haslemere. It had not been very easy to do it, since a case in which he was interested was reaching a crucial point at the time he had been obliged to leave. But he recognised that it was his business to be back in time to greet a lady who had often been his hostess, and who besides was the mother of Christopher and Cecil.

"It's Maurice!" said Mrs Grahame, with some surprise. (The family had reverted by this time

THE YOKE

to the Christian name.) "Can you get away from the office as early as this, Maurice?"

"Oh, well, I thought I should like to see you," said Maurice, shaking hands briskly. "But I don't go to an office, Mrs Grahame."

He then shook hands with Miss Gaskell and inquired after her neuralgia. With Angelica he exchanged a glance of greeting, but no words.

Mrs Grahame quietly bided her time during these proceedings. There was a matter on her soul, however, which she had no intention should remain unexpressed. She didn't like to be corrected. Moreover, she had used the wrong word deliberately, knowing the right one.

"My dear husband," she said, inclining her head reverently, "went to an office all his life, and he invariably called it such."

"Perhaps it *was* one," said Maurice, principally because it seemed to be the only thing to say.

"It was a room," said Mrs Grahame, bridling, "with chairs in it and a large desk covered with papers. But I suppose *you* would consider it beneath you to call such a room an office?"

Maurice took it quite good-humouredly. "It's awfully strange," he said, "how words, meaning

THE YOKE

practically the same thing, often convey quite different impressions. There's a man's digs, for instance—the place where he puts up, you know—to call them 'chambers' sounds rather dignified; 'apartments' seems sea-sidy and gimcrack; 'rooms' is between the two; 'lodgings' is utterly beyond thought."

"Will you have some tea, Maurice?" said Angelica, interposing to release him.

"I don't see any," said Maurice, looking round.

"I can easily send for it, you stupid boy," she said, laughing. "It has only just gone down."

Now whether it was the particular tone of Angelica's voice as she said this, or the momentary flash of mutual understanding when Maurice first entered the room, or the slight irritation left by the "office" question, or whether it was merely her unfortunate inability in any circumstances to keep her fingers out of other people's pies—whatever the cause, Mrs Grahame suddenly conceived a duty. It was a duty which most people would have shirked; of that she was fully conscious. It was also a duty which most people would have considered to infringe good taste. But Mrs Grahame soared above questions of taste where duties

THE YOKE

were concerned. She took up her knitting and for a few moments plied her needles in thoughtful silence; then she coughed lightly and began.

"I have sometimes wondered, Angelica," she said, in the low, even tones she adopted on such occasions, keeping her eyes bent upon her knitting and occasionally turning the work, "if you have considered the wisdom, now that Maurice is no longer a boy, of continuing to live alone together. It frequently happens that things remain hidden from ourselves which are plain to others, and so I feel that I owe it to you, as an old friend, to speak frankly. We sometimes allow an indiscreet position to grow upon us unconsciously, as it were. During Maurice's boyhood the arrangement was a suitable and excellent one; but since he has become a man, and especially since he has come to live permanently in London, it is difficult for your friends to avoid recognising that the position is no longer the same. You are not old, nor even elderly, and you have retained your good looks almost unimpaired. You are still a very attractive woman." (Mrs Grahame felt herself conscientiously justified by the facts in throwing in this sugar-plum.) "You mustn't suppose that I,

THE YOKE

or any of your friends, could for a moment impute the least indiscretion to either of you. But there are neighbours, acquaintances, those who know you less well, who might receive a different impression. That is a consideration which should not be ignored. I do think we owe it to ourselves to see that there should be no occasion for comment, however unworthy. This subject has troubled me of late and I have given much thought to it. My own feeling is that the most satisfactory solution of your difficulty would be to engage a discreet companion to live with you—preferably an elderly widow lady. Such a course would have a three-fold advantage. It would remove your position from the risk of misconception and provide you with pleasant companionship during Maurice's absences; and, at the same time, it would make you the means of relieving one of the most painful of all classes of distress—perhaps the most so of any—that of cultured penury."

Mrs Grahame ceased—quietly as she had begun—and there supervened one of those pauses which only she was capable of producing, and which she distinctly enjoyed. They suggested that she had been effective, that her words had not fallen on dull ears.

THE YOKE

When it had lasted sufficiently long for the subject to be decently changed, Miss Gaskell said, a little tremulously, that she wondered how long it would take to drive to Waterloo.

Maurice cleared his throat and replied that he thought about three-quarters of an hour, allowing for possible blocks and for comfortable time at the station.

Thereupon all was thrown into a breathless fluster of preparation for departure—hurried storing away of knitting paraphernalia, trippings up and down stairs, wrapping and rewrapping of numberless woollen comforts, urgent whistles for a cab.

When Maurice returned to the drawing-room after packing the visitors into a four-wheeler (a hansom was considered unsafe) he found Angelica kneeling before the fire, brushing the hearth. He went and knelt beside her. Her disengaged hand was hanging down. Maurice curled his fingers round the tips of hers and squeezed them. After a time, still continuing to brush the bars, Angelica gently returned the pressure.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Christopher Grahame proposed to walk abroad, considerable preparation was called for. His patent-leather boots had to be inspected, dusted, and drawn upon his feet, his tie to be re-tied, his overcoat to be carefully picked and brushed; his silk hat had to undergo an operation involving the employment of a velvet pad, a silk handkerchief and a warm fire; finally his hands had to be enveloped in a pair of grey gloves. It occupied from ten to twenty minutes, according to the anterior condition of the various articles of attire.

He completed these various processes to his satisfaction one afternoon early in January, about three weeks after his mother's visit to Cumberland Square, picked up an umbrella, so tightly rolled that it looked like a toy in his vigorous grasp, and eventually emerged upon the already lighted streets. He walked down Shaftesbury Avenue and threaded his way across Piccadilly Circus with the assured ease of the native Londoner. He carried his head high and walked with an exuberant

THE YOKE

step. He had just heard that he had passed reasonably well into Sandhurst. The occasion, therefore, was one for some natural lightness of heart. It was also one, as he conceived, for some legitimate indulgence in temporal delights. Accordingly, he was on his way to the Temple, to enlist the co-operation of Maurice Heelas in that enterprise. Maurice had unaccountably failed him of late. To-day he was firmly determined to accept no refusal.

When he reached Mr Kenyon's chambers it was five o'clock. Maurice was seated with the latter's clerk in a dingy and rather musty room lined with books. The clerk was reading the evening paper; Maurice was writing at a table beneath an incandescent gaslight, with open volumes surrounding his blotting-pad and standing on the floor beside him, his places kept by the table legs.

"Sit down, Grahame," he said, looking up as the latter entered. "I can't talk just yet."

Grahame obeyed, and addressed himself amiably to the clerk.

"Oh, don't talk, there's a good fellow," said Maurice; "this is beastly ticklish."

"Right you are," said Grahame, cheerfully. "Anything in the paper, Mr Burkinshaw?"

THE YOKE

Mr Burkinshaw politely handed him a portion of it. Christopher was coming to an end of the more interesting of the advertisements, when an inner door suddenly opened and Mr Kenyon himself appeared. He was a tall, good-looking man of fifty, with clean-cut features and thin dark hair. He nodded to Grahame, whom he had seen in his chambers before, and stood for a few minutes in conversation with his clerk. Then he looked at Maurice.

"What are you doing, Heelas?" he said.

"I'm writing the opinion for Campbell's," said Maurice. "I don't think they've much of a case, sir."

"Neither do I; but just worth fighting, perhaps."

"*Belloc v. Foster* is dead against them," said Maurice, "and so is *Hart v. Pritchard*."

"Yes, but isn't there one of Whitley's decisions which favours them to some extent?"

"*Smith v. Cummings*," said Maurice; "that was overruled on appeal."

"Was it?" The barrister became suddenly alert. "Let me look."

Maurice handed him the volume of Reports. He put on a pair of eye-glasses and read the judg-

THE YOKE

ment. "Yes," he said, replacing the book on the table, "that's unfortunate. What are you saying?"

"I'm making it rather gloomy," said Maurice.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr Kenyon.

He put on his hat. "I am not coming back," he said to his clerk, and passed through the outer door.

"National Anthem," said Grahame, rising with relief. "You'll have to chuck it, Heelas. Mr Burkinshaw isn't going to stay much longer."

"A few moments only," said Mr Burkinshaw, folding his paper. "I rarely remain later than half-past five during recess."

"Only when Mr Kenyon does," commented Chris, mentally. He handed back his share of the paper, with thanks.

"Not at all," said Mr Burkinshaw. "Remarkable case this Clapham poisoning affair."

"Regular Bluebeard," said Chris.

"Quite so," said Mr Burkinshaw. "I remarked to my wife that it resembled one of those tales from the *Arabian Nights*."

He completed his preparations for departure, leaving Maurice with no alternative but to follow his example. With the keys in his hand he

THE YOKE

politely ushered the two young men into the corridor.

Out in the court Grahame broke his news.

Maurice stopped dead. "Good man!" he cried enthusiastically.

"I got in forty-second," said Grahame. "Oh, it'll do!"

"Rather!" said Maurice. "My dear fellow, I'm most awfully glad." He couldn't have been more genuinely pleased had he just scored a victory in his first case. "I told Angelica you meant to get in."

They turned into the Strand. "I've been thinking," said Grahame, "that a little decorous dissipation should celebrate the event."

Maurice laughed. "Oh, yes, I suppose so. But what do you mean exactly? I don't want to drink, Grahame."

"Not unreasonably," said Grahame. "We'll go to the club and have a game of billiards; then dinner somewhere and a music-hall; a little supper afterwards, perhaps. We'll leave the rest to inspiration."

"I scarcely see my way through all that," said Maurice, with a laugh, "especially the inspiration. But I don't mind making a beginning."

THE YOKE

Accordingly he despatched a telegram to Angelica, announcing his intention to remain in town until late in the evening. She read it without the least misgiving. She would have been sorry, possibly her pride would have been hurt by so abrupt an intimation, but she would not have been anxious had the telegram told her he was going to stay away a week.

They played two games of billiards, and afterwards dined at a small restaurant in Soho; one for which Grahame felt a peculiar affection, regarding it as a discovery of his own. Its principal merits were a really excellent *cuisine*, a lack of display, and comparatively moderate charges. There were private rooms in it where you could dine undisturbed, served by a waiter who could be relied upon not to return after leaving the coffee. This was an advantage of which Grahame had more than once informed Maurice; adding that it was useful to know a really good place in case of emergency—so many men didn't. They split a bottle of Goulet '93. Neither of them could have detected any difference between '93 and '95. But they cheerfully paid three shillings a bottle more for the former, Grahame remarking that it was necessary to be very careful how

THE YOKE

you "touched" '95, which was an "unequal" year.

After dinner they turned into one of the larger music-halls. They decorously sat through the first ballet, and then, at Grahame's suggestion, took a "stroll behind." Maurice knew exactly what this meant. But he hadn't the heart, on this evening, to fail his friend. Moreover, he felt perfectly secure against even mental unfaithfulness to Angelica. The "stroll behind" had only been in progress a few minutes, when they met two ladies of Christopher's acquaintance, to whom he presented Maurice with some playful elaboration by an assumed name. The ladies knew it to be assumed and did not resent it. They were of the demure school. That is to say, their hair was parted in the middle and drawn over their temples, and they viewed the world in general, and our two friends in particular, with bent heads and raised eyes. Their dresses—if one may be guilty of paradox—were of ostentatious simplicity.

"Have you just come up?" said the one whom Maurice found was assigned to his peculiar charge.

"Up where?" said Maurice.

"Up to town."

"Oh, no," said Maurice, "I live here."

THE YOKE

The upward glance became exceedingly sly. "Who are you getting at?" she asked facetiously. "Do you think I shouldn't remember you? I've never seen you before."

"I don't often come to music-halls," said Maurice. "I used to come occasionally at one time, but not lately."

"Turned over a new leaf," said the girl, laughing. "And now you can't be good any longer, so you're going to turn back again. It's only human nature, isn't it?" She cast him a very comprehensive glance. "Well, what are you going to ask me to have?"

The four of them drifted into a raised room at the back of the auditorium. There was a bar at one corner; the remaining floor space was occupied by easy-chairs and small circular tables. From here they had a difficult glimpse of the stage over the heads and between the shoulders of the people in front. A waiter supplied their table with the liquids which Maurice had duly applied for, and conversation proceeded vivaciously. But the common mental ground on which the two parties met was appreciably of limited extent. The flow of gaiety was kept up, so far as Maurice was concerned, by an effort which constantly held in

THE YOKE

view an inevitable reaction; while the repartee of the ladies, though very ready, contained little that was strikingly original. They consistently met spirited sallies by asking to be given "a chance"; they repeatedly referred to the fact that they were not "born yesterday"; and they hinted more than once that Christopher was "a bit thick."

Maurice was no spoil-sport. He had joined Grahame to show his appreciation of the latter's success, and he had not the least intention to be a wet blanket. He maintained his share of the conversation to the best of his ability and kept a laughing face; but inwardly he was shivering—shivering to remember that only a few months ago he was actually in the jaws of *this*. He looked around him—at the well-dressed men, callous and *blasé*, moving leisurely about, or sitting with a polished boot upon a neighbouring chair, flicking cigarette-ash to the floor; at the women, all of one class, powdered, flamboyant, bold-eyed. It was inconceivable almost, so he felt now, that all this could ever have appealed to him, that he could have seen it at any time otherwise than as it was.

When the pace began to fail Grahame ordered a fresh supply of liquid stimulant, and when the

THE YOKE

effect had again worn off—by which time the hall was thinning—he suggested going somewhere to supper. Silence, which is merely uncomfortable among ordinary casual acquaintance, is unendurable between people met as were these, a dreaded thing to be warded off by all arms. With silence comes thought. If you don't laugh you must cry, or come near it. So Grahame's suggestion was acclaimed with relief, and the stream of chaff and chatter flowed on with fresh vigour as they all rose and moved into the auditorium. On the stairs, the simple black skirts were modestly flourished, to disclose well-turned ankles and a wealth of white lace frilling. In such order they emerged upon the street, the very picture of joyous *insouciance*, the two demure ladies, each beside her cavalier, rippling along, with rustling under-silks, glancing upward.

They entered a restaurant of the splendid type—streaming lights without, soft shades and sumptuousness within, where obsequious attendants in gorgeous liveries, with nothing to do, stood about in the vestibule. Maurice could never pass these people without a sense of shame. He knew that we have no right to turn thinking human beings into gilded automatons for our aggrandisement;

THE YOKE

that to pay fellow-creatures to make us obeisance is undiluted vulgarity.

So far as that goes, he knew, or, at least, he suspected in his inmost soul—though he didn't dare to think too closely about it—that one-half of humanity has no moral title to require the other half to wait upon it. Most of us who happen to have been born with the means, or with the opportunity or ability to acquire the means, to secure these services, take them as a matter of course. And it may perhaps be said, in our favour, that we have been given hands and minds capable of better employment, employment more generally beneficial than trivial labour, which would otherwise be lost or interrupted. So far we may salve our consciences. But we are not content to stop there—we are not content merely to bend the bodies of our fellows to our services; we must degrade their spirits also—as these automatons. Even bishops—heads of great religious orders—are not ashamed to set up stiff-backed mutes, with arms precisely folded, on the box seats of their carriages.

And then we are surprised that they revolt, surprised at social upheavals and reigns of terror, surprised that our own domestic servants are

THE YOKE

difficult to obtain. We forget that household service in its present form is literally imprisonment, whose victims are under constant surveillance, are deprived of fresh air and exercise, cannot raise their voices even in the parts of the house particularly assigned to them without reproof, must wear a livery of servitude and are permitted social intercourse and recreation only at fixed weekly intervals, under restrictions. It is rather difficult to realise all that is implied by that—the feeling of being caged, bottled up under one roof from day to day and week to week and month to month. We could lighten it; but we have become so inured to being waited upon that we are ashamed to perform even small mechanical offices for ourselves. Consternation reigns in a family at the mention of the shocking possibility of the house being temporarily left without someone—a dependent someone—to “open the front door.” It is that, and that alone, which keeps maids within doors during the whole of a bright summer afternoon.

Practical relief from commonplace daily necessities we may be entitled to receive from those in a humbler position, but not this magnification of our importance at the expense of our fellows.

THE YOKE

Yet such is the littleness of humanity that the former is less hardly dispensed with. We can privately wash up our own tea-things at a pinch, but we cannot carry the tray a few yards in the presence of a visitor. Similarly, our supper-party—for the interruption of whose sprightly progress during this digression we ask the reader's forgiveness—found an abundance of automaton in the vestibule and a paucity of waiters in the restaurant. The manager knew his patrons; better to wait for your supper, if your consequence is adequately recognised, than a quickly-served meal and no kow-tow.

He would have been horrified by any comparison with those inferior places of refreshment where people actually shout for attendance; but, nevertheless, there was quite a suggestion of a scramble in the handing and removal of the various dishes. The intervals between the courses were especially irksome to Maurice, for he looked upon the completion of the meal as all that now divided him from the fair fulfilment of his compact with Grahame. So he was considerably disconcerted to gather from his companion's remarks that he was supposed to have committed himself to further adventures.

THE YOKE

"Oh, I'm not coming home with you," he said, hastily.

"What!" The girl shot at him a quick flash of indignation—of anger.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Maurice. "I didn't know you were assuming that."

"But you've been talking to me all evening."

Maurice couldn't deny it. Moreover, he had a sudden vivid perception of the matter from the girl's point of view.

"You think I've treated you badly?" he said.

"Well, what do *you* think?"

He meditated.

"Would you still think so," he asked a little dubiously, "if I gave you—well—a couple of sovereigns?"

"What for?"

"For a present."

"For nothing at all?"

"Yes."

"Not even a kiss?"

"No."

"Treated me badly!" cried the girl, with vivid irony. "Not much! I should think it was a bit of *all* right."

THE YOKE

"Even better than if I came with you?" ventured Maurice.

"Oh, I don't know," she said guardedly.

"Wouldn't you prefer my room to my company? You may as well confess. It won't make any difference." He bent a little towards her, smiling calmly.

"Oh, well," she admitted, "I'm rather tired; and one doesn't get much rest at nights."

"Shake hands, then," said Maurice. He took her hand and left the two coins in the palm. "Now we are both satisfied. . . . I wish you hadn't to do it."

"So do I," said the girl.

She looked at him, for the first time, with some genuine feeling, as a being who possessed heart and soul as well as a body. Then another aspect of the matter struck her.

"But don't you *want* to kiss me?" she asked, with a note of incredulity.

"Not in the least," said Maurice, laughing.

Suddenly her manner changed. Her professional powers had come into question. She was on her mettle. She glanced round the room to see if they were watched. Finding that most of the other parties had already left and that those who

THE YOKE

remained were too preoccupied to observe their secluded corner, while Christopher and his companion were engaged in vivacious conversation on their own account, she propped her plump forearms, bare to the elbow, on the table, and rested her chin on her hands. Then she leaned towards Maurice and pouted her lips, smiling seductively.

"Kiss me nicely," she said, "there's no one looking."

Maurice hesitated. He did not want to wound her feelings. She was decidedly pretty, too—just now even winsome—and she was not painted, only lightly powdered. He would not have objected to kiss her. On the other hand, he had no desire to do so. Angelica had forged him impervious armour against such blandishments. He felt no glow of his blood at the prospect. It would have been a gratuitous restraint on his self-respect. So he found refuge in a pious deception.

"Oh, no," he said, "that might cost you your night's rest." Then, without giving her time to reply, he said to Christopher, "Are you ready, Grahame? We are nearly the last."

Chris was on excellent terms with himself by this time.

THE YOKE

"Ready!" he cried gleefully. "I'm ready for anything—any mortal thing. So's Lucy. Aren't you, Lucy? Lord, you do look ripping when you smile like that!" He snatched her hand.

"Rather!" said Lucy, finishing her wine. "Say the word. If you're very good I'll let you kiss me presently." Then she burst out laughing.

"If he's like his friend," said Maurice's companion, "he'll tell you he doesn't want to."

"What! Oh, naughty!" said Lucy, bending to Maurice with her most alluring air. "You wouldn't say that to *me*, dear?"

"I've forgotten the trick of it," he answered mendaciously.

"Don't you believe him," said Chris.

"Not much!" she cried indignantly. "Forgotten the trick! Have *you* forgotten it?"

"Not half!" said Christopher, gaily. "Neither that nor another. Oh, the bill!" as a waiter respectfully presented that document. He dug his hand into his pocket.

"I'll settle up," said Maurice.

Christopher remonstrated, but eventually, after a brief controversy, gave way.

He dropped behind the girls as they were leaving the restaurant and walked beside Maurice.

THE YOKE

"You're coming to see them home, old chap," he said, in a tone of affectionate confidence which such seasons beget.

"Is that the inspiration?" asked Maurice, smiling.

"It *is* the inspiration," replied Christopher, beaming.

"Not a very original one!" laughed Maurice. "Well, I contracted out of it, didn't I?"

"You're not coming?"

"No, I think not."

"Rather rough on the girl, though."

"Oh, I've made it all right with her," said Maurice.

"What a weird sort of fellow you are, Heelas," said Grahame, momentarily sobering. "I wish I was built in the same way; it would save one such an infernal lot of worry."

He hailed a hansom when they reached the street, and, after a little spirited discussion as to the method of seating, the three squeezed into it.

"You're a good sort," said Maurice's late companion, turning towards him, as she stepped up. "I wish you were coming," and added, in a whisper, "—for yourself."

CHAPTER XIV

"DEAR HEELAS,—If you have an hour to spare any afternoon will you come in and see me? I want to talk to you.—Yrs.

"C. GRAHAME."

It was a characteristic note. Christopher's letters seldom extended beyond the first side of a sheet of paper, and when they did they expressed what he had to say without embellishment or the smallest regard for the delicacies of composition. The same little word could recur four or five times in as many lines without giving him pause; he didn't know what a split infinitive was; and his method of choosing prepositions was apparently to pick them from a hat. Since, in addition, his handwriting had never acquired any definite formation, the result was frequently such as to produce in the mind of a stranger considerable misconception of the qualities and attainments of his correspondent. In short, to vary a schoolboy phrase, Christopher was "not such a fool as he wrote."

THE YOKE

Maurice read the few cramped, round words with some perplexity. February was well advanced by this time, and he had supposed that Grahame had gone to Sandhurst; whereas the note was dated from his old quarters in town. It was unlike him, too, to write; usually he came round to the Temple to make his communications by word of mouth.

He put the note back in its envelope and laid it beside his breakfast plate.

"Something must be wrong," he said aloud.

"Wrong with whom?" said Angelica.

"With Grahame," said Maurice, removing the covers; "he wants me to go and see him. Hooray, it's kidneys."

"Well, why shouldn't he? Does that imply mental derangement?"

"I thought he was at Sandhurst," replied Maurice. "Besides, he's not given to writing notes."

"Perhaps he wants you to help him to celebrate his success again," said Angelica, smiling. She put out a hand and took the plate which Maurice handed to her. She was in excellent spirits, a soft glow of health about her, in a bright morning-gown.

THE YOKE

"Oh, that solitary night!" said Maurice, with prodigious affectation of long-suffering. "You are really quite unkind about it, Angelica."

"I should like you to have more of them," said Angelica, quietly. "I think they do you good. You have been working too hard lately."

"Nonsense!" said Maurice. "I'm not the least likely to do that. And I don't care a straw for music-halls. I can never quite understand what it is about them that appeals to cultivated men."

"Oh, but I can," said Angelica, "—to a man who is working his brain during the day, especially. It's the relaxation, the freedom, the relief of taking his mind for a time from things that matter and letting it drift among empty trifles. He doesn't feel inclined to follow the intricacies of a play; besides, the order and restraint are irksome to him. You are doing without all this to spend your evenings with me and sometimes to take me to a theatre and to dine at people's houses and have them here and play domestic bridge, like a staid old gentleman." There was rather a wistful expression in her soft grey eyes. "Are you sure you are happy, Maurice?"

He took her hand and held it. "Awfully happy," he said, "—awfully—awfully."

THE YOKE

Angelica breathed a sigh of content. "Sometimes it seems almost too good to be true," she said.

"What does?" said Maurice.

"That we can do this, live in this way, which most people would consider so frightfully immoral, and yet be so utterly happy and each retain our self-respect and respect of one another."

"What makes me so thankful," said Maurice, "is that we have had the luck to find it out. I'm tremendously glad I was obstinate that night." He paused, and then asked a little diffidently in a lower voice, "Are you, Angelica?"

She didn't answer, but after a momentary interval, rose suddenly and wrapped him convulsively in her arms.

It happened to be Saturday. So Maurice had a free afternoon to devote to Chris—a circumstance of which the latter had possibly taken account when he penned his note. Maurice went up to Shaftesbury Avenue immediately after lunch. As he made his way along the pavements filled with eager City men hurrying homeward, he was conscious of increasing vague uneasiness on his friend's account, and this feeling deepened as he mounted the broad stone steps leading to Gra-

THE YOKE

hame's rooms. In response to his light knock the latter called to him to come in, and he opened the door of the sitting-room. Christopher was sitting in the corner of the settee, his head resting upon a cushion, one leg extended along the seat, smoking a cigarette. There was a small stand beside him with an ash-tray upon it, but no book nor paper nor magazine, nor sign of any occupation beyond the rather uninteresting one of watching his smoke wreaths. Apparently he had been brooding. That was as much unlike him as the writing of the note.

"Did I disturb you?" said Maurice. "You weren't asleep, were you?"

"Oh, Lord, no!" said Christopher. "It's good of you to come round, Heelas. Sit down. The cigarettes are on that little table"

Maurice sat down and lighted a cigarette. He was confirmed in his misgiving by Grahame's appearance. There was a change in him. The old happy, cheery expression had gone—gone, it appeared to Maurice, irrevocably—and had been replaced by that of a man much older. His skin was grey beneath the familiar warm colouring, his round cheeks were thinner, his eyes were grave and steady. In a line, his face had the unmistak-

THE YOKE

able stamp of one who had suffered—suffered mentally.

Maurice went straight to the point. "Something is wrong?" he said.

"Yes," said Chris.

Maurice waited.

"Can't you guess?" Chris asked.

"No."

"I've been caught—badly."

"Caught?" said Maurice, scarcely apprehending.

"The other night, you remember—"

Maurice sat up in his chair, gripping the elbows. "What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"It's it—it—it."

"The worst?" The words came hardly above his breath.

"The very worst," said Chris.

There was a dull pause. Something like ice had run through Maurice. This was a thing he had heard of, thought of, knew the terrors of, but had never come to close quarters with.

He pulled himself together. "Perhaps you are wrong," he said. "Have you seen a doctor?"

THE YOKE

"I've seen two. I thought the first might be an ass."

"The second confirmed him?"

"Oh, yes. There's no doubt, old chap. Pitch me another cigarette."

Maurice did so, and there was a further interval of silence.

"Of course I'm done for the army," said Chris, presently.

"What does the doctor say?" asked Maurice, following his own line of thought.

"He says he can cure me in time—sort of cure me—but it'll take a long time. I ought never to marry."

"Did he say so?"

"He hinted it. I shall have to keep away from women's society—to be a sort of outcast from my fellows—get a reputation for a misogynist."

"You can live unmarried without all that. That needn't follow."

"Not for you, perhaps. You're a lucky dog, Heelas. You seem to have been born without the usual human weaknesses. I wish to goodness they'd rigged me out in the same way."

Maurice felt a hypocrite. But his lips were

THE YOKE

sealed. It was the worst thing he had ever had to suffer for Angelica.

"In the meantime," continued Chris, "I've got to go on living—if the sort of existence I shall have to lead for the next year or two can be called living." He glanced round the comfortably furnished room. "The Mater fixed me up here—she has done everything, in fact—her level utmost—she has been splendid. She was keen on the army. And now I've lost it."

He paused.

"Flatly," he burst out suddenly, "I can't tell the Mater. I'll kill myself rather."

Maurice got up and stood with his back to the fire. He dug his hands into his pockets and looked at his friend.

"Don't talk like that," he said, "it won't do any good. Let us look the thing steadily in the face and see what's best to be done."

"I'm not talking wildly," said Christopher, examining the lighted end of his cigarette. "The Mater's not one of the understanding sort. You know that. She would rather have me dead than like this, I think. I believe it truly."

"I don't," said Maurice, firmly; "I don't for a single moment." He spoke quite honestly, and

THE YOKE

not merely to inspire Christopher. He was fully conscious of Mrs Grahame's prejudices, but he could not doubt that her deep attachment to her son would prove stronger even than they.

"This is the worst of all," proceeded Christopher, still blowing small specks of ash from his cigarette. "Anything else she might have got over, in time—but not this. This puts me outside the pale."

"It's *always* the worst of all," exclaimed Maurice, with sudden vigour, "among people who set up for judges of conduct—always—always. I've never been able to understand why. Other things *seem* worse, but it's *always* the worst of all."

"It *has* to be, I suppose," said Grahame, dully. "If it became the fashion to wink at it, the social system would have to be fixed up on a different basis."

"That means that the objection, at the bottom, is practical and not moral."

"Of course it is."

"But they don't know that—these people with views. Mrs Grahame doesn't know it?"

"Oh, Lord, no!" said Christopher.

Maurice walked to the window and looked out.

THE YOKE

Men were still hurrying along in the street below on their way home, eager to catch the 3.4 at Victoria, instead of being obliged to wait for the 3.15. He had seen this same stream often before without being conscious of any special characteristic of it. To-day he was struck—as humanity in general always strikes us in the face of a private calamity—by its callousness, its shallowness. What mattered it to them, so long as they got quickly home to their poultry pens or their slips of garden in the suburbs, that a boy full of promise, full of health, full of lovable qualities, had been struck down, at the very outset of his career, by a terrible and avertible malady?

He went back to his seat and took another cigarette. "It's no good saying I'm sorry," he said, "the word is preposterously feeble. One feels utterly mad, somehow, that such a thing should hang on a chance."

"Of course everyone knows the chance is there," said Christopher, dully. "Twenty fellows come off fairly free. I happen to be the twenty-first. They had a system in the Roman armies, hadn't they, of making every tenth man pay the penalty for the fault of the whole? I always thought it was moderately rough on number ten."

THE YOKE

He dropped his head on the cushion and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"I suppose I *have* been a pretty bad lot," he said meditatively, as he watched it disperse.

"Don't talk rot," cried Maurice, fiercely, sitting forward in his chair, "don't talk utter rot, Grahame. No one I know, or ever met, has less of the bad lot at the bottom of him. You've gone as reasonably straight as a man can."

"Some people would call it uncommonly crooked," said Grahame, with a wry smile.

"And look here, Grahame," continued Maurice, speaking earnestly, "don't get an exaggerated idea of what you have to go through. Every moment you can save, in making up your mind to it as an inevitable nuisance and tackling it with that idea, is a pure gain. There are things that are worse."

"What are they?"

"Oh, lots. Some much worse. Cancer, say."

"Men don't nudge one another and point across the street and say 'That man has cancer.' I tell you, I'm a leper; I'm made unfit to mix with decent people; the very thought of oneself becomes loathsome."

"That's all nonsense," said Maurice. "The

THE YOKE

thing itself is not so bad if it's treated properly. It's really only troublesome because of the sentimental and moral effect, which you exaggerate ludicrously at present, and the practical inconvenience, which we must think about and find some way to get over. These sort of worries often look very big at first, but they come down tremendously when you get your mind fairly broken in to the new situation."

He spoke, it must be owned, appreciably more optimistically than he felt.

"It's no good, Heelas," said Grahame, calmly. "It's good of you to make the best of it. But I'm done, so far as this world goes. If there's another, they may give me a second chance. I've paid pretty early."

"I wish you wouldn't take that view of it, Grahame," said Maurice, with keen distress.

"How can I possibly take any other?" Some of the pent-up agony in Chris found vent. "It's not a view—'tis a fact. I wish to heaven it wasn't!" Suddenly he got up and strode to the window, threw up the sash and put his head out.

Maurice followed him. There was a pause.

"Grahame."

Chris slowly drew in his head.

THE YOKE

"You are not seriously thinking of that?"

"Of what?"

"Of putting an end to it?"

Chris stood by the open window, the cold air sweeping in upon him, his young, round face lined and drawn with pain.

"Why not?" he said. "What single inducement has life to offer? What prospect of anything but misery and degradation? Think of the future—an outcast—a pariah—condemned and disowned by my own mother! Think of it, man. Why should I cling to this beastly body that has become hateful to me, that I despise and detest?"

Maurice laid a hand on his arm. "You are not yourself," he said. "Come away from that window."

"Leave me alone, Heelas." Chris shook him off, and again stretched his head through the opening and looked down upon the street below.

"Mysterious suicides," he muttered. "You often read of mysterious suicides, Heelas. They don't give the reason in the paper. Thank Heaven for that! . . . I should make a queer mess of that fellow's topper."

Maurice put both his arms round him and attempted to draw him gently back. Chris tried

THE YOKE

to shake him off again, but Maurice resolutely retained his hold.

"Leave me alone," repeated Chris, petulantly.

"Not until you come away from the window," said Maurice, firmly.

Grahame screwed himself round, grasped Maurice by the collar-bone and forced him back.

"Take your hands off," he demanded, angrily.

"Not until you come away," persisted Maurice, beginning to pant.

He made a sudden effort and dragged Chris a foot or two from the open window. The action was fatal. Grahame had reached a pitch of nervous excitement which could brook no such arbitrary treatment. He wrapped his arms about Maurice and swung him violently back towards the window.

"If you will, you shall," he shouted.

He was suddenly outside himself, dominated by forces beyond his control. Every other thought was overwhelmed in the single desire to hurl himself and his friend to the hard pavement, forty feet below. Maurice felt it, knew it, in the tense grip that bound him. From vague anxiety for his friend he was plunged in a vivid moment into the stern consciousness that only his physical strength

THE YOKE

could avail to save either of them. They reeled, hovered over the window, then with a swirl and a thump they were in the centre of the room; the little table with the cigarettes upon it cracked down and a chair beside it, and they were at the window again. Not a word was uttered. In silence, their breath came deeply, strenuously; in silence, their boots scraped on the polished boards at the edge of the carpet. Chris was the heavier of the two, but the lack of sufficient food and sleep during the last week or two had weakened him. With a great effort he raised Maurice, lifted him slowly from his heels to his toes. Then his strength failed. Maurice held him. They swayed inward, tottered a step, two steps; Maurice's head shaved the marble mantel. Then they fell together, with a crash, among the fire-irons on the hearth.

Chris was sobered by the fall. He picked himself up stiffly and gave a hand to Maurice, who was underneath. They were both slightly dazed. Maurice had been cut below the cheek-bone by the brass fender. He dabbed the place slowly with a pocket-handkerchief.

"I'm sorry, Heelas," said Chris.

"It's all right," said Maurice, simply.

THE YOKE

"Not for that scratch; I mean for trying to murder you."

"I know," said Maurice.

They quietly recovered the scattered cigarettes; then set the little table on its legs and sat down on either side of it.

"I can't think what happened to me," said Chris. "I didn't know what I was doing. I suppose it must make rather a mess of you when one beastly thought goes on drumming on your brain for days and weeks without stopping.

"Of course it does," said Maurice, "there's no doubt about that. I think I'll have some whisky or brandy," he added, getting up, "if you've got any."

"Sorry, old chap; it's in the cupboard. What a wild beast to come and see! I'm glad we didn't go—I mean, I'm glad *you* didn't go."

"Don't keep harping on that note, Grahame," said Maurice. "Sha'n't you have any?"—he was pouring out the spirit. Chris shrugged his shoulders. "You know we are not entitled to take our lives. Whatever happens they are not ours to take. We hold them on trust."

"I can't see it," exclaimed Grahame, emphatically, "I never could. I didn't ask for this body;

THE YOKE

I didn't want it; it was forced upon me. Why should I respect it?"

"We often have presents given us that we certainly didn't ask for, and that we don't want and don't like. But we don't throw them on the fire. We should feel mean brutes if we did."

"Yes, but if the present had a malignant microbe inside it, we should pretty soon have it in the biggest and deepest fire we could find."

"It's not one of those things you can demonstrate by reason," said Maurice. "It's an instinct; it's something we *feel*. A man who has been born with sufficient income to live upon can logically say to himself, 'I've had life forced upon me; I've had money forced upon me; there's no reason why I should do anything.' But if he simply lives—lives perfectly morally, but uselessly—he can't help losing his self-respect. He has got the feeling that he is betraying a trust."

"Yes, of course," said Chris; "life is a pleasant thing to that fellow. What he feels is, that he has had an uncommonly handsome thing done to him, and that he's doing absolutely nothing in return."

"I don't think it's merely that," said Maurice. "We might make the income only just enough to

THE YOKE

keep him clear of starvation, and the feeling would still be the same."

"At any rate he starts clear," said Chris, "and not with a big detriment. If I were to consent to go on living, in present circumstances, to go on doing the work which I'm presumably desired to do, I should consider it an act of uncommon magnanimity. In the case of a man who has a family depending upon him, I'll admit there may be something in your ideas; though, even so, he has been forced to acquire the family by the necessities stuck within him; it hasn't been of his own free will. He never has a choice; he's driven—driven—driven—from the cradle to the grave, by the force that is working everywhere to some unknown end of its own. Most people think it's a serious end. To my mind it appears to be the finest practical joke that ever was heard of—for those who play it. Man is made to think he's enjoying himself, when all the time he's quietly preparing the climax. The great idea is to lead us on till we cover the earth, cover every inch of it, and jostle one another for a foothold. Think what a comical sight that'll be! Side-splitting. It's only by setting up arbitrary marriage-laws, and cultivating artificial notions of morality, and providing vicious outlets—

THE YOKE

calling for the sacrifice of platoons of feminine victims and occasional masculine ones, like me—that we are able to keep the jest within bounds of any kind, and prevent ourselves becoming utterly, abjectly ridiculous. There's another way of spoiling the joke, which we are only just beginning to learn—that's to take the bait cautiously and leave the hook. When it's fully developed the laugh will be on our side. I'm sorry I sha'n't be here to join in."

"I can't make you out, Grahame," said Maurice, a little anxiously. "I never heard you talk like this before. I didn't know you could."

"Neither did I," said Grahame, breaking up a coal with his foot, "until a week or so ago."

Maurice set to work to grapple with this mood with all his energy, and eventually succeeded in bringing Chris round to a more normal frame of mind. By that time the afternoon was well advanced, and he got up to leave, feeling more at ease, for the time, on his friend's account.

"It has done me a heap of good having you to talk to, Heelas," said Chris, as they separated; "but it hasn't been much of a game for you, I'm afraid, and it nearly cost you your life. Jove, I mustn't think of that!" he added quickly, with

THE YOKE

sudden fear of himself in his face. "The devil of a thing like this is that you have to tackle it alone, hide it, except with a man you know absolutely well."

Maurice was struck by a difficulty. "Angelica knows you sent for me," he said. "What shall I say?"

"I don't mind her knowing," said Chris, after a moment's reflection. "In fact, I think I should like her to. She is one of the few who understand. If the world were made of Angelicas it would be liveable in, even for me."

Maurice hung at the door, with his hat on, and surveyed his friend earnestly.

"Don't," he pleaded, "don't, Grahame. If you won't think of yourself, think of your people, think of your friends, think of me."

"All right," said Chris, and his face lighted all at once with a delightful beam of his old sunny smile, "I'll try."

CHAPTER XV

IT was half-past five when Maurice reached home. He looked in all the sitting-rooms for Angelica, but she was in none of them, so he went upstairs. He knocked at the door of her bedroom. Receiving no answer he opened it and went inside. It was empty.

Maurice always entered this room with a kind of reverence. Everything in it was sacred in his eyes: the plain pink wallpaper, hung with a few water-colours—amateur efforts, the gifts of friends, but creditable as such; the soft muslin curtains, sprinkled with a pattern of dog-rose; the suite of Sheraton furniture; the dressing-table, standing across a corner by the window, with its wide oval mirror and bright array of silver brushes and trinkets; the shining brass bedstead, swathed with warm coverings. Moved by a sudden impulse, he lifted a corner of the swan's-down quilt and pressed it to his lips.

He turned guiltily at the sound of a footstep. Angelica, in furs, was standing behind him, glowing from a walk.

THE YOKE

"Silly boy!" she said. But the indulgent smile which accompanied the words, and the suspicion of moisture in each of her eyes, sufficiently contradicted them.

"Does it really mean so much to you, Maurice?" she asked softly.

"More now than ever," said Maurice.

Angelica removed her jacket, and stood in front of the mirror, drawing pins from her hat. Maurice half sat and half leaned upon the edge of the bed.

"More now than ever?" repeated Angelica. "Why, Maurice?"

"I've been to see Grahame this afternoon," said Maurice.

Angelica placed her hat on the dressing-table and lightly puffed out her hair with the tips of her fingers.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten," she said. "And what did he have to say? Anything that I can be allowed to hear?"

"Something very serious," said Maurice.

Angelica turned round sharply. She looked at him with quick anxiety.

"My dear boy, what have you done to your cheek?"

THE YOKE

"Oh, that's nothing," said Maurice. "I want to talk to you about Grahame."

"Yes?" said Angelica.

"He's in awful trouble," said Maurice.

"What sort of trouble?"

"It's his health."

Angelica turned pale. She stood quite still and waited, without speaking.

"You must guess," said Maurice. "I can't tell you."

She looked deep into his face. "Was it that evening?" she said, a quick terror in her voice, "—that evening that you spent together, after he had passed for Sandhurst? Was it that?"

Maurice made no reply.

There was a tense pause. Angelica stood gripping the brass rail of the bed-foot, her rings biting red marks into the white flesh. Acute distress stood in her eyes and strained her whole frame.

"Are you *sure*, Maurice?" she said, slowly.

"Yes," said Maurice, simply; "there's no doubt about it. His career is ruined."

Angelica turned aside without a word, and dropped into a low chair, trembling. A long silence followed. Maurice had not stirred from his posi-

THE YOKE

tion on the bed-edge. His hands were in his pockets; he had rarely looked at Angelica during their short colloquy.

"Oh, Chris!" she murmured softly at length. "Poor, poor Chris! With all his brightness and sunniness and freshness, and his youth and his happy prospects and his generous heart—that *he* should have been caught in the vortex!" Tears stood in her eyes.

Maurice suddenly left his place and came round to where she was sitting.

"Look here, Angelica, what is to be done? You can always see so clearly. So far as I am concerned, I made the best of it to Grahame, but I simply can't think—I simply can't imagine."

"Just how bad is it?" asked Angelica.

"He won't be admitted to the army, Mrs Grahame can't be told, and he has no means," responded Maurice.

"No," agreed Angelica, half mechanically, her brows bent in thought, "Mrs Grahame can't be told."

"Then what on earth is he to do?"

"Well, if he can't go into the army," said Angelica, calmly, "he must do something else."

"But what?" said Maurice. "He is too old to

THE YOKE

make an absolute beginning in almost anything. The time has passed while he has been reading for the army. Then the reason which applies against the army will apply against other things. And, of course, for the next year or two he won't be good for much—certainly not for anything like continuous work. But the big, the supreme problem is Mrs Grahame."

"Yes, I understand all that," said Angelica, still thinking. "It is a difficult situation. But there must be some way of escape."

"He sees only one," said Maurice.

She looked up sharply. "Do you—"

"Yes," said Maurice.

"Oh, how terrible! how terrible!"

Her face was strained with the keenest pain.

"Maurice, we must prevent that at all costs. Did he seem to think of it deliberately?"

"It's hard to say," said Maurice. "He was changeable, strange, utterly unlike himself. I had rather a difficult time with him. But I left him calmer. I think he is safe for the immediate present; but the trouble is going to be to tide over the time until we can get his affairs settled on a new basis."

"Poor Chris!" said Angelica again very softly,

THE YOKE

gazing with moist eyes out of the window. "Poor, poor boy!"

But it was not her nature to rest satisfied with unavailing compassion, or to be dismayed by apparently insuperable obstacles. Presently she turned to Maurice with an air of quiet briskness.

"Well, now," she said, "let us take these difficulties in order. To begin with, there is Mrs Grahame. She must be told the truth; that the doctor won't pass him for the army."

"It is the truth, of course," said Maurice, meditatively, "the pure and simple truth. But will she be satisfied without details? You know, she's frightfully keen on anything to do with human ailments and talks reels of amateur medicine."

"She will *have* to be satisfied if no details are forthcoming," said Angelica. "It is quite as necessary for her own sake as for his that she should be kept in the dark. Although Chris is no worse a son or a man for this misfortune, she wouldn't be able to realise it, and it would be a terrible trouble to her to know the whole truth. The main point is that the reason he has to give up the army will not be in any doubt."

"No," said Maurice, slowly, "no—of course, it

THE YOKE

wouldn't." He plumped down into a cane-seated chair and clasped a knee between his hands. "Jove, I believe that's the way out," he added, brightly; "even if we have to invent a varicose vein."

"Then, as to what is to become of him until he recovers his health," proceeded Angelica, calmly; "Mrs Grahame will probably want him to go to Haslemere. But that would hardly be judicious, if it could be avoided. If it is not practicable for him to continue in his present rooms, he could come and live with us."

"You're a brick," said Maurice, fervently. "But I don't believe he would come—I'm afraid not."

"At any rate, make him understand that we want him to; tell him that you would like it and that I should like it; don't let him feel that there need be any trouble or difficulty about the next year or two."

"And what is he to do afterwards?" said Maurice. "What about the future?"

"Oh, that seems foolish," replied Angelica. "There must be many things still open to him. How old is he?"

"Nearly twenty, I think," said Maurice.

THE YOKE

"You say it as gloomily as if he were forty," said Angelica, with a laugh. "Now, let us think. Begin with the law. What have you to say about that?"

"The Bar?" said Maurice.

"Oh, yes. I don't know why it should be so, but the solicitor's profession is not one for which one has much respect."

"I think the feeling is," said Maurice, "that it's unnecessary; you oughtn't to have to employ a solicitor. There is no natural need for him."

"Well, is he too old for the Bar?" asked Angelica.

"No," replied Maurice, laughing slightly at the necessity to make the admission, "as a matter of fact, he's not. There's no age limit. Men often get called quite late in life."

"There, you see!" cried Angelica, triumphantly, "the very first thing I suggest!"

"I rather fancy it would suit him, too," continued Maurice, reflectively. "I've thought so several times. In fact, I believe he has said as much. Oh, you are perfectly splendid, Angelica," he cried, springing up with sudden boyish enthusiasm, seizing one of her hands in each of his own, and smiling upon her gratefully and happily.

THE YOKE

"You've made the whole thing seem absolutely simple and straightforward. I feel a lot more cheerful about him already. I'll go and see him again to-morrow and make him understand—*make* him."

"Yes, go the first thing in the morning," said Angelica, "directly after breakfast. He mustn't be allowed to brood. Bring him back with you to lunch. He'll try to get out of it, but don't let him. Insist. If nothing can make him come, stay with him instead; but remember that I shall be alone, and tell him so, and tell him that I told you to tell him so."

"I expect he won't like to meet you," said Maurice. "He says he's a leper, an outcast."

"Then tell him," said Angelica, with one of her exquisite smiles, "to come and make my acquaintance, because he evidently doesn't know me."

Maurice lifted the white hand he held in his right, with an old-world gesture of homage and admiration, and touched it lightly with his lips.

"I think he'll come," he said.

CHAPTER XVI

As Maurice crossed Piccadilly Circus on the following morning, a deep-toned clock in the distance slowly struck ten. It would not have been audible on another day of the week. To-day it was penetrating and reverberant; the only sound to challenge Maurice's own footsteps. The roar of vehicles for a brief space had ceased from troubling, and such good people as walked in that direction on their way to places of worship had not yet emerged from their homes.

The influence of this unaccustomed silence is usually a depressing one; but Maurice, on the present occasion, was far from being so affected by it. He passed lightly across the intersecting roadways, only thankful to be spared, for once, the always impending shocks of diagonal traffic. The partial lifting of a cloud that has been hanging over us produces a degree of buoyancy we should never have experienced had the cloud not fallen. The supreme ecstasy of painlessness is hidden from us until a violent spasm of toothache lulls. Similarly, Angelica's clear perception and

THE YOKE

vigorous practical purpose had reacted on Maurice's spirit in proportion to his previous depression.

He was informed by the steward of the building in which Grahame's rooms were situated that the latter was not yet up. He never rang for his breakfast earlier than ten on Sundays, and often not before eleven. Maurice ran upstairs, whistling softly. There was a lobby, four feet square, connecting Chris's small suite. The bedroom door faced him as he entered; that of the sitting-room was on the left. After a momentary hesitation he knocked boisterously on the former. Receiving no answer he burst in with a laugh.

"Wake up, you froust!" he cried. "I've come half across London—"

He stopped. There was still no response. The room was in the semi-darkness produced by a drawn blind intercepting the daylight. Maurice walked over and pulled it up. Then he looked at the bed.

It was empty. The covers were undisturbed; Grahame's pyjamas lay folded beneath the pillow. The room in other respects was similarly neatly disposed. It had not been slept in.

Without waiting to recognise his fears Maurice opened the door communicating with the sitting-

THE YOKE

room. He was met by a glare of electric light. Here again the blind had not been raised. Chris was seated in an easy-chair, with his head bent wearily on his chest.

"Grahame," said Maurice; then quickly, "Chris! Chris!"

The second name was a shout—a cry.

Maurice had never seen anyone dead before. But he knew it—knew it absolutely—without moving a step nearer, without lifting that heavy head or feeling for the still pulse. He was surprised at his own calmness. He was conscious that he had turned very white; but he did not faint, he did not lose his head nor behave wildly in the first flush of horror, of grief. He took in every detail. He knew exactly what had occurred and how it had occurred. He saw the hypodermic syringe on the floor beside the chair; he noticed that on the little table, which still held the cigarettes, there now stood a small bottle with the cork out; he even observed that there was a note propped on the mantelpiece, addressed to himself.

These minutiae were photographed on his consciousness, as he stood at the door, in instant company with the great, staring, stony fact of death itself. He was left with as little doubt

THE YOKE

about the means of the tragedy as of its completeness. It always seemed to him afterwards that his immediately succeeding actions were performed in a dream. He went up to the quiet figure in the chair, lifted his left arm and rolled back the sleeve. He saw nothing unusual. Then he turned up the left trouser. On the white inner skin were the small blood spots he expected to find. He quietly replaced the trouser and walked out on to the stairhead, called up the steward and sent him for a doctor. Then he came back into the room and closed the door. And, suddenly, the mechanical power that had kept him going appeared to snap like the spring of a watch, and he came back with a whirl and a rush to clear consciousness and black, blinding fact. He knelt down beside Chris—dropped down beside him in utter abandon of despair—leaned his elbows on the arm of the chair and broke into deep, choking sobs.

His life had fallen mainly upon easy, happy lines. Things had run smoothly with him. Never before had he known his capacity to *feel*. He revealed himself to himself in the tumultuous force of the emotion that gripped him and shook him. The lot of an orphan without kindred elicits our sympathy, but at least he is spared the recurring

THE YOKE

shocks of the loss of those near and dear to him. Though even there, even on the score of the trouble itself, he is the loser as well as the gainer. Maurice's present pain was an eventual asset. A man has not lived till he has suffered. There is a strength that comes from tribulation which can come no other way.

He was oppressed (as everyone is, as everyone necessarily must be, in the face of the death of one who has been a near and intimate companion) by inability to grasp it—to realise the inexorable truth that he should never again see Chris's bright smile, never hear his cheery voice nor his jolly laugh. Never. Never. It seemed incredible that fate could hold in its bosom, and suddenly precipitate upon him, anything so awful as that.

He raised one of the limp hands and pressed it between his own. "Chris, are you never going to speak again?" he said hungrily, tears staining his cheeks; addressing his friend in death—under the direction of some delicate intuition—by the personal name he had never used in his lifetime. "Oh, I can't believe it! Speak. Speak. Lift up your head. Get up. Get up. Oh! Oh-h!" He dropped his head in his hands and groaned in the utter misery of this first, stunning sorrow.

THE YOKE

Presently he went on speaking more calmly. "Yes, you've paid, old boy—faithfully, squarely paid. This is the price which the Nonconformist Conscience demands for what you did, and you've honestly settled up. Nothing else would appease them—quiet streets, well governed cities—no—the pound of flesh, the pound of flesh. And so you've paid it them—you and thousands of others."

"And yet," he shouted, springing up in a sudden fury of anger and despair, "and yet they hope for heaven!"

Just as he had plumbed a depth of grief hitherto unknown to him, so now he realised unsuspected intensity of resentment. He tramped the room with clenched hands, his blood in a white heat of indignation against the forces that had slain his friend. He projected a single-handed crusade against that grim body which again and again had hurled back brigades and platoons. At that moment he would have enjoyed—exquisitely enjoyed—to have had some smug, self-righteous individual by the throat and to have wrung the life out of him.

He stopped at last before the mantelpiece and took Chris's note from it. He touched it tenderly,

THE YOKE

as some sacred thing, and broke the seal with a sense of something like sacrilege. It contained a single sheet of notepaper, three parts covered with the childish, cramped handwriting and short phraseology of his friend.

"DEAR HEELAS,"—it ran—"I'm sorry, but I can't stick it out after all. You bucked me up this afternoon. But I've been looking at facts since you went. If there was a gleam anywhere I would hold on, but there isn't. So the sooner the better. It's no good shivering on the brink. I can't say I want to do it. As a matter of fact, I'm in a dead funk. I'm going to use morphia. It's the simplest thing I can think of. It sends you to sleep, and you don't wake. That's what I've wished for every time I've gone to bed, since I knew.

"I talked a lot of rot this afternoon—I've forgotten quite what—but anyway it must have been rot. I was in a bad temper. I don't want you to think I'm going to take the jump in that sort of spirit. It's altogether different now I've made up my mind. My present sentiments spell peace and goodwill towards all men.

"If you should happen to meet the girl again

THE YOKE

don't let her think I blamed her. Very likely she didn't know. They often don't. Whether she did or not, I'm too sorry for her to feel angry. It won't be long before she follows me. Lord, Heelas, they do have a shocking time!

"Well, that's about all I have to say. The only thing that makes me sorry is the idea that you may be so—you and Cecil—and the Mater, of course, but she's different. I hope Cecil won't think I've treated her shabbily. It's sure to look like it.

"Good-bye, old chap. *Moriturus te salutat*. I always fancied that phrase.—Your affectionate friend,

C. GRAHAME.

"Pinch anything of mine you have a fancy for."

As Maurice was slowly returning this letter to its envelope he heard a footstep in the lobby. There was a quick knock, and he looked up and saw the doctor at the door—a young man with a small light moustache and a kindly, intellectual face.

"Oh," said Maurice, slightly nervously, "it's good of you to come so quickly." He looked at Chris. "I'm afraid you can't be of any use, can you?"

The doctor came and stood in front of the chair,

THE YOKE

and looked gravely at the motionless figure in it.

"Dear me!" he said. "Dear me!"

He applied the usual tests in silence.

"He has been dead some hours," he said, straightening himself. "May I— Are you a relative?"

"No," replied Maurice; "merely a great friend. He has no relatives in London. He was out of health, and so I came to see him early this morning, and this is how I found him."

The doctor picked up the syringe, and sniffed at the bottle on the table. Then he rolled up Chris's left trouser, as Maurice had done, and rolled it back again.

"Do you know why he did it?" he said.

"Yes," replied Maurice. "So will you, before long."

The doctor understood. He had already suspected.

"It's a pity," he said. "He was a fine young fellow to be caught in that way. It's a pity."

"It's always a pity," said Maurice.

"Yes, it's always a pity," the doctor agreed. "But you'll never alter it."

"I mean to try," said Maurice.

THE YOKE

The doctor looked at him with sharp interest, struck by the sudden intensity of his tone.

"My dear young man," he said kindly, "devote your energies to something better worth your while. England has made up its mind. In cases of this kind it has only one thing to say—and it will go on saying it until long after you and I are in the grave—'Serves him right.' If fifty times as many lives were sacrificed as actually are, it would say it just as hard." He glanced at the still form in the chair. "I'm older than you are, and very likely I have had more experience. I've learnt, at all events, that there are some causes which, however righteous and just they may be, cannot get even a hearing. Your moralist doesn't take into account the physical composition of man and his physical necessities. He won't take it into account, and it's a waste of breath to ask him to."

"They're narrow-minded idiots!" exclaimed Maurice.

"Ah, now you are beginning to call names," said the doctor, smiling. "That will never advance you a step."

"You didn't know what a good sort he was," cried Maurice, brokenly. "If there is a heaven, I'll bet a hundred to one he has gone there."

THE YOKE

The doctor looked at him with kind professional solicitude. "This has been a bit of a shock to you," he said. "You never had to do with anything of the sort before."

"No," replied Maurice.

"I thought not. Now, you had better go home. I will do what is necessary, with the help of the steward. Get out into the country this afternoon, and come and see me to-morrow, if you can, between two and three. Communicate with his friends, of course."

"There will have to be an inquest?"

"Oh, yes. You can leave all that with me. There need be very little publicity. The papers are always discreet in cases of this kind."

He picked up Maurice's hat and umbrella and put them in his hand.

"You're awfully kind," said the latter, half mechanically. He took a last glance at Chris. He was still in the same position, hunched up in the chair, his head bowed on his chest. "It's difficult to realise, isn't it, that only a few weeks ago he was one of the happiest and jolliest fellows in the world? Yes, I'll come to-morrow."

He left the room quietly and went down the stairs and out into the street. For some time he

THE YOKE

walked on automatically, guided only by habit. His faculties were all focussed on the tragedy he had left behind him. And now that he was removed from the visual evidence of it, the difficulty of realising, of fixing upon his mind the barren, absolute fact, was greater than before. He struggled with it, struggled to make himself understand. A very eternity seemed to have elapsed since he had received Chris's short note on the previous morning; and yet it was barely twenty-four hours. All the real suffering of his life had been crowded into them. He knew he looked older, *must* look older. Men don't grow by gradation, but are jerked into age by a series of shocks. It is part of the perpetual scheme of things, that we are made capable of deep attachment to our fellows, whose successive removal beats time on our brows, until we have been broken to the point at which we ourselves must add to the furrows of those who came after.

When Maurice came back to a full consciousness of his surroundings he found that he was in Piccadilly, that it had begun to rain, and that his umbrella was up. If he had had any definite idea about the method of his return home, it had been to walk down to Charing Cross and take a District

THE YOKE

train. Now that he was so far advanced in the right direction, however, he determined to continue on foot. He glanced irresolutely at one or two empty hansoms, but immediately went on again when the cabman seemed to be stopping. He shrank from the confinement. He felt an imperative need to go on walking, even in the rain, to walk as long and as far as he could, right out of his trouble. After all, his news would grow no worse from keeping.

He chose the Green Park side of the street, for quietness and to avoid opposing umbrellas. After passing Hyde Park Corner he ran into numbers of people returning from various places of worship—some well-to-do, some of a humbler class. He glanced mechanically at several of the groups as they passed him. They were chatting brightly, most of them, laughing—often, evidently, at their own discomfiture in being caught by the rain. He had frequently seen such groups before without being struck by any special characteristic of them. To-day they brought home to him forcibly a very interesting truth about his fellow-creatures, a truth that has been curiously missed by many profound thinkers: namely, how *happy* they all are—taken as a whole, how marvellously, exuberantly happy!

THE YOKE

It was half-past twelve when eventually he reached Cumberland Square. He met Angelica in the hall.

"I was too late," he said.

Angelica stopped.

"Dead?"

"Dead."

She turned white to the lips and shuddered physically.

"Oh-h!" she moaned. "This horrid, horrid world!"

CHAPTER XVII

THAT same afternoon saw Maurice arrive at Waterloo and enter the two-o'clock train for Haslemere. None of us, I suppose, will envy him the mission that was taking him there. Angelica had wanted to go with him, and Maurice in his heart would have been infinitely thankful for her support. But the very disinclination for the task which he felt himself told him how much it would cost her to share it, and he had obstinately refused to let her come. It was very sweet to Angelica to allow herself at last to be overruled; not because of the pain she would be spared, but because of the knowledge it brought her of Maurice's strengthening and deepening character.

And yet it may be doubted whether he faced his journey to-day with much greater reluctance than he had done that first one to the same destination, taken in company with Chris nearly a year before. His misgivings, at all events, were of a different quality. He had grown older since then; not so much in actual time, but in the knowledge of the world and in knowledge of himself. Personal

THE YOKE

diffidence had very little to say to his present concern. He had not overcome it—possibly it is never entirely overcome by one originally put under its yoke—but he had learnt to see it in its proper relative importance, and at least had contrived to push it into a secondary position as an influence on his actions. As he watched once more the lines of birches creeping past, on the long gradient to Haslemere, his thoughts were no longer of himself and the ordeal in front of him, but of Mrs Grahame and Cecil. He was genuinely, deeply distressed by the knowledge of the exquisite pain he must inflict upon them. He was feeling, not “how awkward it will be to tell!” but “how terrible it will be to hear!”

There was a walk of half a mile from the station to Mrs Grahame’s house—a walk which he took to-day in the midst of that subtly pervading odour of bad cigars peculiar to Sunday afternoons in the country. When he reached the house and pushed open the door in the garden wall and walked up the short flagged path—everything silent, bright, peaceful—he felt like a dynamiter stealing into a sleeping dwelling to destroy it. The maid who admitted him said that Mrs Grahame was at home, but, recognising him, added confidentially that

THE YOKE

she was lying down upstairs. So too, it appeared, was Miss Gaskell. Miss Grahame, however, was in—and, presumably, awake. Maurice, accordingly, asked to be allowed to see her, and was shown into the drawing-room.

It may be supposed that he was relieved to find his interview was to be with Cecil. That was far from being the case. Of the two, he felt now it would have been less difficult to tell Mrs Grahame. He hated the thought of hurting Cecil. And here, let it be said, he was no longer free from personal concern in the matter. He fancied he must ever after remain in her mind a messenger of woe, whose coming she would instinctively dread.

Well, that must be borne. His news must be told, and to Cecil. She did not keep him long in suspense. Fortunately for him she was not one of those members of her sex who allows a visitor to kick his heels for a quarter of an hour, and eventually appears with the statement vividly placarded upon her that the interval has been spent in intimate communion with a toilet-table. Cecil always looked well, but the effort which had gone to achieve that result was never obtrusive. Maurice had time only to walk to the window, to stare for a moment mechanically at the clump of

THE YOKE

pine on the distant hill-top, and to turn round. He could feel his heart beating quickly, but he was thoroughly master of himself. Then the door opened and she came in, quietly, with a gentle rustle of skirts. She was wearing a gown of soft rose-coloured material, and looked infinitely fresh and fragrant, infinitely like some new-petalled tea-rose. Oh, heaven! to take it cruelly in one's hand and crush it!

"This is really delightful of you, Maurice," she said, smiling, coming forward with the graceful elegance that was inseparable from her. "You can't imagine how welcome you are. Mother and Aunt Annie make Sunday a day of rest in a literal sense, and I was getting desperately tired of my own society."

Maurice took her hand. Then he laid his other on the top of it.

"Cecil, I'm awfully sorry—it's best to get it over—I've got some bad news."

She turned slowly very pale. The gentle, shielding tone told more than the words. It is possible that, even then, she knew; that, even then, her sub-conscious mind stretched out and grasped the uttermost.

"It is about Chris?" she said on the edge

THE YOKE

of a breath, staring at him with frightened eyes.

"Yes."

"Is he ill?"

Maurice said nothing. He pressed her hand more closely. For a moment she looked away, then her eyes met his again, wildly, fearfully.

"Dead?" she breathed.

The word hung on the air while she waited for the denial that did not come. She kept her gaze on his face, staring straight at him, as the seconds passed, with unseeing eyes. He dropped his own; he could not look at her. Her hand was still clasped in his, and he felt it quiver. Then, after a time, while he still looked down, there broke from her—so low that only the utter silence made it audible—the most exquisitely pathetic sound he had ever heard in his life, half moan, half sob. She swayed a little, and he put an arm round her to keep her from falling. But she gently released herself, walked without assistance to a couch and sat down on it, resting her head upon the cushion.

Maurice went to the door, intending to fetch some stimulant. She divined his purpose, however, and interposed.

THE YOKE

"It isn't necessary," she said. "Don't go into the hall. Mother may hear you. Wait a little."

He came back obediently, pulled up a chair and seated himself beside her. Minutes ticked on without either speaking—three, four, five. Cecil was resting with closed eyes; Maurice was staring dully at the carpet between his feet.

"It was an accident?" said Cecil at last, in a low voice.

"No."

"Not?—" She lifted her head sharply, a new fear in her face.

"Yes, it was that, Cecil," replied Maurice, steadily. "I went to see him this morning, and I found him—sitting in a chair. I don't think he can have suffered any pain. He was simply asleep—and he didn't want to wake."

"He—didn't—*want* to?"

"He hadn't been well for some time," Maurice answered. "The doctors wouldn't pass him for the army and it weighed on him."

"There must be something more," said Cecil, calmly. "You must tell me everything, Maurice. I would rather know."

Maurice sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, still staring at the carpet.

THE YOKE

He had foreseen this difficulty from the beginning—from the moment the obligation upon him to break the news had become apparent. To tell her was beyond thought. And yet, how was he to explain his silence? She was gazing intently at him, her face composed now, but still pale, her eyes dark and tense, and heavy with unshed tears.

"There is no more," said Maurice at length. "I have told you the simple truth, Cecil; he was out of health—very much out of health—and it weighed on him."

"But it must have been something so terrible to lead to—to this. And, if so, why weren't we told? How is it that only you knew? It seems so strange, so—so—so very odd."

In spite of her more or less successful effort to find an innocuous last word, it was plain that she only half believed him, and that she resented being kept in the dark.

"I understand just how you must feel," said Maurice. "But you know that some illnesses have the effect of making the patient very sensitive about them. He can't bear to have them mentioned, to have them known."

"But he told you."

"He told me yesterday."

THE YOKE

"Yesterday!" said Cecil, sharply. "You saw him yesterday?"

"Yes," said Maurice.

"Then you must have had some inkling of what was in his mind? You couldn't have seen him so recently as that without noticing some change in him, unless you were very blind. Oh, why didn't I see him yesterday? Could you do nothing—you are a man—could you make no effort at all to help him and save him?"

She spoke very bitterly, her distracting grief finding vent—as it so often does—in unreasoning anger against the instrument immediately responsible for it. Moreover, Maurice had been unconsciously but inevitably feeding her sense of injury. In times of family bereavement, there is nothing more calculated to add gall to our cup than to find that an outsider—be he never so intimate a friend—is in possession of information with regard to one of our own flesh and blood which has not been vouchsafed to ourselves.

"Yes, I did notice a change in him," Maurice replied, without resentment; "he looked fagged, and was very depressed at first and occasionally excited. I stayed with him some time, and when I left he seemed in better spirits and more like

THE YOKE

himself. Perhaps I ought to have insisted on spending the night with him, but it would have looked rather like an officious intention to watch him, and he might—”

He stopped. A voice was speaking in the hall—a voice which they both recognised. They waited, looking at one another, with indrawn breaths.

“It’s mother,” said Cecil, faintly. “She will come in here. Maurice, I can’t tell her. Will you?”

“Yes,” said Maurice, quietly, getting up.

He accepted the office as a matter of course. It was a task for all that which a man twice his age might have tried to avoid without shame—to tell a mother of the sudden death of her only son. Cecil fully realised that, and as she saw him get up she was conscious of a sudden, powerful revulsion of feeling in his favour, a revulsion which swung the pendulum far beyond where it had ever stood before. She was proud—in the midst of her exquisite sorrow, she was glad and proud that there was a man in the world who, in the face of the contumely she had just cast upon him, was ready to stand up unhesitatingly and do this for her.

There were a few seconds of suspense and then the door opened. Mrs Grahame had tidied herself

THE YOKE

after her sleep and looked neat and smiling and refreshed.

"Oh, it's you, Maurice," she said, coming in briskly. "I thought I heard a man's voice. Is Chris in the library?"

"No," replied Maurice, quietly; "Chris is not with me."

"Dear, dear! that young gentleman is getting into my bad books. It must be a month since we saw him. Well, it's pleasant to be vouchsafed a glimpse of one of you. We are three poor, lone women, and we don't like to be forgotten."

"I am afraid you mustn't credit me with any merely sociable intentions to-day," said Maurice. "I have come down on a very sad errand, Mrs Grahame. Chris cannot come any more."

For a moment or two Mrs Grahame gazed at him sharply, mystified and inclined to be offended.

"But why?" she said suddenly, in the quick tones she used when she was displeased. "Is he in some disgrace? Has he done something to make me ashamed of him? Don't speak in riddles, Maurice."

"He is out of the reach of shame and disgrace," said Maurice. "There are no such words where Chris has gone."

THE YOKE

"Maurice! Maurice!"

"He is happy—I am sure he is happy."

"But what are you saying to me? I don't understand you." She looked at her daughter, but gathered no relief from her mien. She had begun to weep softly. Mrs Grahame's voice rose to a shout. "Cecil, what is he saying to me? Is he mad? Are you both mad? Cecil! Cecil! Speak!"

"Yes, mother, yes," said Cecil, getting up and taking her hand. "I am here. Don't look like that, dear. Perhaps, in some way we can't understand, it is best."

"Dead!" cried Mrs Grahame, all at once breaking the bands that swathed her comprehension. "Dead! Dead! My boy dead!"

There was a second, two, three seconds, of utter silence. Mrs Grahame's hands trembled upward, and the jewelled fingers picked into the trim white locks on either side of her head. Then those two young people, broken so suddenly to deep pain, heard the most terrible of all sounds—

"The shrill-edged shriek of a mother."

Maurice jumped forward and caught her as she fell. He laid her on the couch.

THE YOKE

"Get some brandy," said Cecil, beginning to unfasten the neck of her bodice.

Her face was bloodless, save for a faint tinge of colour in her lips. For one sickening moment Maurice thought she was dead. But, after a time, the spirit they poured between her lips induced a slight return of warmth. She did not readily regain consciousness, however. She opened her eyes once, and apparently dimly recognised them, but immediately closed them again. And there was a sigh in her pulse.

"I think you had better go for the doctor," said Cecil. "He lives at the other end of the village. Anyone will show you the way. I am afraid it is her heart. We have always known it was weak."

"I broke it too roughly," said Maurice.

"No, no; you couldn't have done it more gently. She was obliged to have the shock. No one could have saved her it."

He went off, and after chasing the doctor to a house half a mile from his own and interrupting a pleasant social gathering in which he was taking a leading and admired part, eventually secured him and brought him back with him. By that time Mrs Grahame had been got upstairs to her

THE YOKE

own room. The doctor remained with her about twenty minutes, and then Maurice heard a maid show him out and close the front door behind him. For a long while after that he was left alone in the library with his pipe and his gloomy meditations. But before he had to start for the station to catch his train, Cecil came downstairs to speak to him.

"You must go now, Maurice," she said.

"Shall I stay the night?" he asked.

"Oh, no, it isn't necessary. The doctor says there is no immediate cause for anxiety. But I am afraid he thinks rather gravely of her." She put her slim, white hand into his. "I'm sorry I spoke unkindly, Maurice. It was very mean of me. I think I hardly knew what I was saying just then. You have been very good to us; you have done everything you possibly could."

"Very good to you!" echoed Maurice. "I feel like a murderer who has burst into a happy house and devastated it."

He went into the hall and put on his coat.

"You will come again?" said Cecil. "Often—just the same? We shall want you more than ever now. You won't let yourself lose sight of us because—because Chris has gone?"

"Not I," said Maurice, fervently.

THE YOKE

When he got to the door he turned and saw her standing in the centre of the hall—a tall, slender figure, very young, utterly sad, yet instinct with quiet dignity in every line of her form. His whole nature welled up for her, and he broke out spontaneously,—

“I’m frightfully sorry for you, Cecil.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Oh, don’t speak like that,” she said. “It makes me cry, and I can’t afford to cry yet, while mother is ill.”

“I wish—” said Maurice, and hesitated.

“Yes?”

“I wish I were your brother, Cecil.”

That made her laugh, and he was glad he had said it.

As she walked slowly up the stairs to her mother’s room, Cecil wondered if she wished it too.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Maurice reached home he found Angelica seated at the piano, finding expression of her pensive spirit in Chopin's Nocturne in G major—the still, small voice from the soul of things. He opened the drawing-room door gently—not to mar the effect of one of the tender notes softly dropping on the air. Angelica went on till the last chord hushed off the strings, and then quietly closed the piano and turned round.

"I always think there's a culmination of that theme," said Maurice, "which we shall only hear on the other side. We couldn't bear it here; it would drag the soul out of us too soon."

"How have you got on?"

"Oh, it has been an awful shock to Mrs. Grahame. I didn't know her heart was weak. Did you?"

"What has happened?" said Angelica, quickly.

"She was unconscious for some time, and the doctor doesn't take an altogether rosy view. Oh, Angelica, it's frightfully rough on Cecil."

"Poor girl—yes," said Angelica. "I'll go down

THE YOKE

to-morrow." She got up. "I think it's rather rough on Maurice too. You look pale, old boy." So saying, she put a hand on each of his shoulders, looked solicitously into his face, and kissed him. "Come down and have some supper."

She duly went to Haslemere the next day, and reported, on her return, that Mrs Grahame had rallied somewhat, but that she was still in a precarious state of health. Moreover, since recovering consciousness she had begun to ask questions. That was a difficulty which had had to be met. The doctor had said emphatically that to submit her, for the present, to the further shock of learning that Chris's death had been self-inflicted would be to run a risk for which he was not prepared to accept the responsibility. So half-truths were resorted to. She was told that Chris had been suffering severely in his health, and that he had died from an overdose of morphia. She was allowed to assume, if not explicitly told, that the malady had been of a kind to cause acute physical pain, and that the morphia had been taken to relieve it.

There are those who take the quite reasonable position that a falsehood can be justified by no circumstances. In the present case, the truth would have carried with it, not improbably, Mrs

THE YOKE

Grahame's death. It was the plain question whether human life is worth preserving at the price of deceit. That is at least a debatable point; but at any rate Cecil and her aunt adopted unhesitatingly the pretty general view that it is.

They were assisted in carrying it out by the brief and formal character of the inquest. Maurice and the steward were the only witnesses called in addition to the doctors, and the former's account of Chris's behaviour on the Saturday afternoon gave a charitable jury sufficient excuse to record a verdict of temporary insanity. This was a relief to them, not only for itself but because Mrs Grahame had insisted from the first upon seeing him, and, had the funeral involved special features, it would not have been wise or desirable to have moved him from London to his family home. As it was, he was taken to Haslemere. And so the mother looked her last on her son, before he was laid in Mother Earth.

From that time, though it could not be said from day to day that she grew appreciably weaker in health, yet she failed to improve. The desire of life had become feeble; the spirit had gone out of her. The hold which elderly people have on existence, especially those whose constitutions

THE YOKE

have never been robust, is frequently, if not generally, dependent on external circumstances. They get into the habit of living, as they get into the habit of doing other things. As a break in domestic routine disturbs their composure, so a sharp sentimental affliction sucks up the springs of their vitality. We have noted that Chris's death had been to Maurice the first of that series of shocks which jog mortals into age. In Mrs Grahame's case it became sorrowfully apparent to those about her that it was likely to prove to be the last.

Yet, beyond the cardiac weakness, she could be said to be suffering from no actual malady, and, after keeping her room about a week, she came down one morning draped in shawls, leaning heavily on Cecil's arm. Her friends and neighbours, who came to express their condolences, were startled by the change in her. From a middle-aged, active matron she had become, in these few days, an old woman.

During this period, Angelica's and Maurice's visits made almost the only breaks in the monotony of Cecil's life. She sat with her mother, talked to her, worked with her, read to her, played games of cribbage and backgammon with her;

THE YOKE

tried her utmost, through all, to infuse the spirit of her young, glowing life into the tired frame. Miss Gaskell could relieve her of the worries of household management and of many of the practical duties of nursing, but she could not take her place with her mother. They found that Mrs Grahame fretted if Cecil remained long out of her sight. It was her daughter she needed.

One day when Maurice came down, Cecil went to the station to meet him.

"I want you to take me a walk before we go in," she said. "Will you? Right up on one of the commons. I feel I want air—a whole month's air in a few breaths."

"Have you never been out since—since then?" Maurice asked.

"Never beyond the village," said Cecil.

They went on to Blackdown—that wild upland of heather and gorse, unharnessed as yet to the uses of man—and looked down from its solitude over the wide expanse of fertile meadow-land towards Guilford, and, turning, saw behind them the whole panorama of pine-clad hills, culminating in the long line of the Hog's Back and the commanding summit of Hindhead. For an hour they filled their lungs with the pure air and their eyes

THE YOKE

with the scene amidst which a great poet had chosen to live and to die.

On their return they found Miss Gaskell again alarmed about her sister. Mrs Grahame had fainted while sitting in a chair, and Dr Bryce had been hastily sent for. He was leaving the house as Cecil and Maurice came in.

"Another slight attack," he said, in answer to Cecil's quick inquiry; "we must expect them until her strength returns. I would not say there is cause for definite alarm; but she needs care—great care. As soon as she is strong enough to bear a journey we must get her away for a change. In the meantime, keep her as bright and cheerful as you can; amuse her, entertain her; try to get her to take an interest in things about her. I will come and see her again in the morning."

That was in March. During the bright, crisp weeks of early spring, amid the manifold signs of returning life about her, she appeared to gain a slight renewal of energy; but this disappeared with the approach of summer, when the dust began to collect on the trees, and the heat, which she had always found trying, sucked the freshness out of the earth. Slowly but still perceptibly, as the hot days dragged through, her weakness increased.

THE YOKE

It may perhaps be doubted whether Cecil noticed it, in her patient daily ministrations—whether she saw how surely the sands were running out—but it was fully apparent to Angelica and to Maurice, whose visits were separated by sufficient intervals to throw changes into relief. Among them, none was more indicative of the approaching deeper change than the wonderful and subtly pathetic softening of her nature. She was able, now, to find excuses even for people whose views and aims and habits of life were most radically opposed to her own; could recognise their possibly good motives and honest endeavour. Her solemn shake of the head for those of whom she failed to approve no longer obtruded itself. She was amiable, kind, quiet, and most surely dying.

.She lingered on through June and July, but in the early part of August her life ebbed away.

“It doesn’t seem the least bit right to say that she died,” Cecil wrote to Angelica; “she just faded out of life. The day before, we thought she was even better. She came downstairs for several hours and talked about Chris quite calmly and quietly, which she very rarely could do.”

THE YOKE

When she received this letter Angelica was visiting in North Devon. Maurice was in the Channel Islands with a party of friends. So far as any arrangements for the future were definitely made at that time, they expected to meet in town in September. But Angelica had soon evolved another scheme.

"I am going to take a cottage down here," she wrote to Maurice, "and ask Cecil to come and stay with us. (Of course you will come too, or provide a very good excuse. But whether you come or not, I am going to ask Cecil.) Poor child, it is grievous to think of what she has gone through, the last six months. Probably she won't be able to leave for the present—there are always things to be done—but perhaps by September she could come. It will be lovely here then. The cottage I want to get, if I can, is near Lynton, overlooking the sea. There are trees about it, and the garden is flattened out of a hillside which runs right down to the beach. There is a lovely view of the bay and the red sandstone cliffs curving round it and the pines. I am sure it will do her good, if we can make her come. I shall go tomorrow about the cottage. I'm so afraid of it being snapped up if I wait. So if I get it, and

THE YOKE

Cecil refuses to come, imagine me with an eight-roomed cottage on my hands."

A week later she wrote:—

"I've got the cottage—four guineas a week. I don't think it's exorbitant, there's quite a lot of room in it—five bedrooms and two sitting-rooms, besides a good-sized hall and a very useable veranda on the sea side. Of course it is quite simply furnished, but comfortably—nothing to jar at all seriously, don't be afraid. It can be worked by two servants. I shall send for one of the maids from Cumberland Square and try and find another locally. I've taken it from the 1st of September, but Cecil can't come until the 10th. Miss Gaskell is going to stay with some friends on that day, and Cecil doesn't like to leave her alone by coming away earlier. She writes quite brightly at the prospect of coming—I'm so glad it occurred to me. By-the-bye, could you trust any of those friends of yours to take care of her? If so, bring him with you and let them meet. Imagine me turning matchmaker! But if ever marriage was 'the best of all ways,' it seems to be such in Cecil's case now."

Maurice's friends, however, had to return to their respective homes or to other bourns in the

THE YOKE

early days of September, and so he arrived at Lynton in solitary state. Angelica, by then, was installed in her cottage. For a week they were alone there together. The weather was perfect. They walked along the undulating, picturesque cliffs, they explored the breezy Exmoor scenery, they sat on the beach or in the garden of the cottage and read *Lorna Doone* for the second time. It was a week which was destined to remain memorable to Angelica.

One night she said abruptly, "Maurice, your hair wants cutting. You had better go to town and have it done."

"To *town*?" said Maurice, amazed.

"Yes; and, since you will be there, you can take advantage of the fact to bring Cecil back with you."

CHAPTER XIX

IT came about, therefore, that when Cecil Grahame alighted from her train at Waterloo, on the morning of the 10th of September, she found Maurice waiting for her on the platform. At this time she was necessarily the victim of that curious convention called "going into mourning." It lingers doggedly, as customs will, though few of us probably, if asked, would really wish our friends to express—one cannot say their grief at our departure, because the thing is not dependent on grief—but their recognition of it, by this lugubrious parade of "sombre black." Still, we are advancing. We have got rid of the plumed hearses and the mutes. Some day—it is not too much to hope—we may get rid of the "mourning."

In the meantime, it holds but slightly diminished sway; and so, as Cecil had lost both her mother and her brother, she had duly dressed herself in black. Her deep sorrow could not be intensified by it; neither could it be lessened. Simply custom required her to advertise the fact that she had suffered recent bereavement, and she had obeyed it.

THE YOKE

Maurice had been waiting her arrival somewhat nervously; vaguely expecting to see her tearful and drooping, hardly knowing how his greeting should be voiced. Therefore he was considerably relieved, when the train had discharged its burden, to espy her, among the crowd, coming towards him with a frank smile.

"I really think you are the kindest creature in the world," she said, "to come all this way to meet me."

"Oh, good gracious, nothing of the sort!" he expostulated. "I had some other things to do."

"What were they?" said Cecil, firmly.

"They wouldn't interest you," said Maurice, hurrying on towards the cab-rank with her hand-baggage; "to get my hair cut and things of that sort."

Cecil, following breathlessly in his wake, laughed with genuine enjoyment, as she had not done for months, laughed with merry derision.

She pressed him unmercifully. "I want to know what 'the things of that sort' are?"

Maurice hailed a hansom. "Where are your things?" he said, avoiding the point. "At the back? How many? Two. All right. Jump in—I'll find them."

THE YOKE

He helped her into the cab, placed the small things on the footboard, and darted away after the heavy luggage.

"Now," said Cecil, returning to the charge when he had taken his seat by her side, "tell me, please, how you have spent every minute of your time since you came to town?"

"Well," said Maurice, submitting—perhaps not altogether unwillingly, for there was a subtle delight in it—to be cross-examined, "I arrived at six last night."

"Went to Cumberland Square?"

"Yes."

"Had dinner?"

"Yes."

"What then?"

"Read a book," said Maurice, "a poor one, and went to bed."

"Honour bright?" said Cecil, quizzing him.

"Absolutely."

"What was it called?"

"I've forgotten," said Maurice, after thinking.

"Very feeble," said Cecil. "However, we will give you the benefit of the doubt. What time did you have breakfast?"

THE YOKE

"Nine," said Maurice, cautiously, "nine to half-past."

"That means half-past. You would read the paper at the same time, so it would take you till ten. There was no hurry, you see, as my train didn't arrive till half-past eleven."

"But I had to get my hair cut," Maurice reminded her quite indignantly.

"You really *did* have it cut?"

He took off his hat. "Can't you see?" he said, tenderly smoothing the proof of his words. "The man who did it was one of those fellows who take a little hand-glass when they've finished and show you all round the back. I said it was just as I liked it. I wonder if anybody ever says anything else?"

"That was about half-past ten?"

"About," said Maurice, feeling himself getting edged into a corner.

"In Bond Street?"

"No, at Harrods'."

"Twenty minutes from Waterloo. What did you do with the other forty?"

"I went downstairs and bought some cigarettes. You can't get any decent cigarettes at Lynton," he added, with a really creditable

THE YOKE

attempt to invest the statement with adequate gravity.

"The return fare from Lynton is at least three pounds, and Harrods deliver post free. I hope you'll never have such a weak case as this to conduct in court, Maurice." She was thoroughly enjoying herself. "What next?"

"I went down to the smoke-room for half an hour."

"And then?" quite breathless, her eyes sparkling as she looked at him.

"Oh, I drove to Waterloo," cried Maurice, relinquishing his last breastwork with a sort of laugh, which Cecil instantly covered with the brighter ring of triumph that had been breaking on her lips.

"It's perfect nonsense, all the same, Cecil," Maurice continued quickly, "to try to make out that it means the least bit of hardship or self-sacrifice for me to come and meet you. It's a relief to see town again after six weeks' exile. I've had quite a good time here and enjoyed every bit of it. Even now, though you're trying to make me look foolish, I'm enjoying it tremendously. And I'm most awfully thankful to find you so decently well and cheerful."

THE YOKE

The horse, with a jingle, swung them from side to side through the quick turns of Mayfair.

Cecil suddenly and spontaneously took hold of Maurice's arm and pressed it. "You're so good to me, Maurice," she said.

Now, at this gentle, unexpected pressure, Maurice felt a decided thrill—there was no doubt about it, it was clearly and unmistakably a thrill—and it somewhat alarmed him. He knew, from instinct and from books, that in such circumstances people were liable to feel thrills; but he was not at all prepared for such an experience himself. He thought that Angelica had made him immune from them, as she had from Chris's temptations. Yet it was utterly delicious; and for a few moments he held himself very still—as you might if a robin had perched on your shoulder—lest she should withdraw her hand.

"Of course that's all rot," he said, in a voice that was suddenly slightly constrained. "I don't the least mind receiving my due if I've really done anything to earn it—nobody does—especially from you—but I haven't got the conscience to accept it in regard to this, much as I should like. I've simply been pleasing myself."

Cecil did withdraw her hand, but slowly,

THE YOKE

quietly—not in such a way as to convey the impression that she thought she had received a rebuff. So Maurice felt that his conduct of the little circumstance had not been amiss. And therein possibly he was justified. For when a woman makes a trifling advance it is not so easy to hit that exquisite mean between too great a fervour of appreciation, which may frighten her, and so elaborate a show of nonchalance as will wound her pride.

"I don't mean this time only," said Cecil, becoming pensive. "I was thinking of how you have behaved always, ever since I knew you—you and Angelica."

"How long is that?" said Maurice, bustling on, eager to keep her thoughts from her trouble.

"Since I've known you?"

"Yes."

"How long have I been alive?" she replied.

"Yes; well, how long have you? I'm twenty-three."

"You can ask me that question now," said Cecil, smiling, "but you mustn't in ten years."

"Of course I know you are about twenty or twenty-one," said Maurice, "but I'm not sure which."

THE YOKE

"I was twenty-one last week," she answered.

"Last week! Good Heavens! And we never knew or never remembered! Why—" He pushed up the trap with his umbrella. "Stop at the first jeweller's," he said to the driver.

"I shall be really angry if you do," cried Cecil, turning upon him sharply. "I'm not joking, Maurice. I shall be very, very cross."

"Then I am afraid I shall have to submit to it," replied Maurice, calmly, "much as it will pain me. We can't let your twenty-first birthday pass without recognising the fact. Angelica would be awfully upset."

The cab pulled up and he jumped out. "Come along," he said.

"No," said Cecil, firmly, "I sha'n't, I really sha'n't, Maurice. You are making me feel so uncomfortable."

"All right, then, stay where you are," he said gaily, and disappeared into the shop.

He emerged in about five minutes and again took his seat by her side.

"From Angelica and me," he said, slipping a small package into her hand. "And I hope you'll have the very best of luck for all the rest of your life, Cecil, if only to square the balance."

THE YOKE

She made no reply, but slowly unfastened the string from the box which he had given her, lifted the lid, and took out a red morocco case. She opened it and revealed a small diamond and pearl brooch lying on a bed of plush.

"Don't blame me for the design," said Maurice, with a laugh. "There wasn't much choice. I wish I had known before we crossed Piccadilly."

Few women are so free of vanity that they can look at a pretty piece of jewellery, when it is presented to them for their own, without some show of emotion. In Cecil's case, it took a peculiar form. She saw, not only the sparkling toy, but all that lay behind it. Her fortitude, bravely sustained until that moment, gave way before this spontaneous kindness. First one tear, and then a second, fell among the packings on her lap.

"Oh, what an ass I am!" exclaimed Maurice, bitterly vexed with himself.

Cecil dashed away the tears. "No, you're *not*," she cried, looking at him with shining eyes, "you're not an ass, Maurice. You are much too good and kind, and that is what made me cry, like a goose. I think," she said, beginning to laugh,

THE YOKE

"I must be like that man in one of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas, who says he 'only yields to kindness.' It's a dear!" she exclaimed fervently, looking at the brooch. "I shall love it."

She continued to gaze at it for some moments with a sort of childish delight. Then she closed the case and returned it to its box.

She gave it back to Maurice. "Take care of it for me," she said, "until we get to Lynton."

It was a long journey from Paddington, but it did not appear particularly so to either of them. For one thing, the heavy passenger traffic at that date was chiefly in the reverse direction, and so, for the major portion of the time, they had their compartment to themselves, which allowed them to talk without constraint. Cecil did not repeat her slight breakdown. Indeed, the reaction after the long strain of the last half year induced a superficial buoyancy beyond her normal wont. Youth, unless it has been broken by a childhood of wretchedness, submits hardly to be subdued for months to a minor key, and eagerly seeks the first outlet for its ebullient spirit. Cecil looked steadily forward: she struggled to refuse to let her mind look back. She felt that she wanted never to see the house at Haslemere again—never, never again.

THE YOKE

She was going into a new country, among new scenes and new faces—but the faces were of old and dear and tried friends—and the knowledge stole into her soul like myrrh and rose from it again and again in delicious gushes, flowing through her with a warm glow of joyous surety. And then suddenly, in the midst of an outburst, she would think that it was not right of her to be so light-hearted, that Maurice would misunderstand her, and she would check herself.

But Maurice not only understood her perfectly well, but did everything he could to encourage and incite her. If ever she gazed for a few moments thoughtfully out of the window, he recalled her to the present with some inconsequent remark that arrested by its very irrelevancy. 'He talked nonsense to the utmost that was in him. And, all the while, he was quite conscious that, although he might be doing his duty, he was having an excellent time.

"Do you know that Angelica has turned match-maker, Cecil?" he said suddenly, to break one such pensive period.

"Angelica!"

"She thought it would be a good idea if I got down to Lynton some nice, honest, sober, trust-

THE YOKE

worthy friend of mine, warranted quiet in double harness, with a view to eventualities."

Cecil blushed and laughed. "You are trying to make fun of me, Maurice. I don't think it's kind of you."

"I'm as serious as a judge," said he, "as some judges," he corrected, with a lively recollection of certain uproariously recognised jocularities from the bench.

"But—but you haven't—Oh, dear!" said Cecil, laughing, and stopped.

"Oh, no, he is not waiting there—you needn't be alarmed. The truth is, I can't conscientiously say that any of my friends fully answers the description."

"You are incorrigible this afternoon, Maurice," said Cecil, "but I'm glad there won't be any strangers. I'm very selfish, but I want to have you both to myself, especially Angelica."

"Thank you," said Maurice, with exaggerated umbrage. "That's the worst of having Angelica to live with; one always has to play second fiddle."

"Oh, it will all be lovely, I know!" exclaimed Cecil, fervently.

"Well, I think you will exclude the drawing-room wall-paper," said Maurice.

THE YOKE

"I wouldn't mind any wall-paper, or anywhere, or anything, with Angelica," said Cecil.

Maurice changed his tone. "Are you so fond of her?" he said.

"Oh, yes," she answered, with the air of stating a fact so inevitable and self-evident as scarcely to need expression.

Maurice in his turn became pensive. "I'm so glad," he said, after several seconds had elapsed.

Angelica met them at Lynton with a small pony-trap which she drove herself.

"Tired out?" she said, looking into Cecil's face.

"No," said Cecil, "not a bit tired. Maurice has been a splendid companion. I never knew he was so amusing."

Maurice was getting the luggage out.

"Oh, don't let him think he is a humorist," said Angelica, laughing, "or he'll give us a terrible time."

The pony was of the sort that women drive—fully master of the situation, regulator of the pace and institutor of the halts. He was quite unencumbered by a sense of dignity. There was a certain spring beside the road, at which he regarded himself as having a prescriptive right,

THE YOKE

whatever his passengers' urgency, to stop and drink. Angelica had weakly admitted his claim when he first put it forward, and thereafter had become his slave. On the present occasion, having satisfied a very trifling thirst, he availed himself of his mistress's temporary preoccupation with Cecil to transfer his muzzle to the surrounding grass and begin to browse.

"Oh, look here, Angelica," cried Maurice, stretching forward and snatching the whip, "there's a limit to everything."

"Don't whip him, Maurice," said Angelica. "Poor old boy, he has a heavy load, remember."

"He's the most thorough-going humbug that ever breathed," replied Maurice, administering, however, a castigation hardly more severe than Angelica herself might have found heart to apply.

By such means they eventually covered the two miles a little faster than they could have walked it, and reached the cottage just as the sun was setting behind the line of cliff to the west. The windows of the house caught the light and reflected it in vivid colour.

"It's a perfect Paradise," exclaimed Cecil, enthusiastically.

All the evening she kept up her spirits, but when,

THE YOKE

following her old custom, she went into Angelica's room after undressing, she stole into her arms, put her head upon her shoulder, and let herself weep. For a while we may leave her there, well assured that whatever of comfort, whatever of strength and hope human lips and human sympathy can give, that she received in full measure.

CHAPTER XX

CECIL looked up from the book she was reading and gazed meditatively out to sea. It was very blue that day, reflecting the blue sky, save here and there where a breaker sparkled. In the distance, almost on the sky-line, a few heavy cargo-boats were slowly making their way along the great water-way to and from Bristol.

Cecil had now been a week at Lynton—a week that had passed in uninterrupted peace, and had given her back the soft bloom and clear skin ravaged by the previous months of confinement and anxiety. Looking back across that little space of sunny calm, the tragedy of the time before seemed unreal. It had left its effect upon her immutably—she was strengthened and deepened, as Maurice had been, in essential characteristics—but her faculties found it difficult to focus, in retrospect, as an actual and veritable part of her life. The sun and the light at Lynton, the quiet days on the pleasant uplands, the spontaneous kindness which surrounded her, had thrown a warm

THE YOKE

haze across the unhappy past. She saw it as through the quivering heat mists that rise on a summer day.

She was seated in a cushioned wicker chair on the veranda. She had been there all afternoon, reading and idly watching the shipping in the estuary. From time to time Maurice or Angelica had joined her for a few moments and gone away again. Just now she was alone, but she could hear Maurice's pen scratching in the room behind her, through the open French window.

"How do you spell 'dependent,' Cecil?" he called out suddenly.

"D-e-p-e-n-d—" began Cecil, glibly, and stopped. "Do you mean the noun or the adjective?"

"The adjective," said Maurice.

"Well, then, it's 'e'—no, it's 'a'—no, it's not, it's 'e.' I'm not sure," she said finally. "I knew before you asked me. It's being asked how to spell things that makes one a bad speller."

"What am I to do—make a blot?"

"Get a dictionary," she called back.

He came out upon the veranda. "There's not a dictionary in the house," he said, "and I'm writing to Kenyon—he's sure to know how it's

THE YOKE

spelt." He took up the book from her lap. "What are you reading?"

"It's rather an old one. I got it out of the little library here."

"*The Wages of Sin*—yes, I remember it."

"Don't tell me the end," she said hastily.

"It's not necessary," said Maurice. "A book with that name tells the end on the title-page."

"I was hoping against hope that it didn't."

Maurice turned over the pages mechanically, and then handed it back to her, open at the spot where she was reading.

"It's a fine book," he said. "It's a pity it's spoilt by the hint at the end that the heroine may lower herself to marriage with that 'goodly youth.' I hate an immaculate man."

Cecil was silent.

"Don't *you*, Cecil?" he asked, a little anxiously.

"I'm not sure that I know exactly what you mean by 'immaculate,'" she said. "I don't like a goody man."

"Oh, but he may fall short of that and yet be an offence. Take an automaton, innocent of so much as a remnant of an original idea, of one spark of imagination; wind it up to think and act precisely as our forefathers have laid it down that,

THE YOKE

in their opinion, it is good for us to think and act; clothe it well, wash it well, and you have this 'goodly youth.' "

"But he is manly and trustable and straightforward," said Cecil.

"Yes," said Maurice, "and rich and handsome. He fulfils every condition which a careful mamma could wish to find in a prospective son-in-law. But a complex character like this heroine—what is her name?—could never be happy with a man of that kind. He would bore her to extinction. A woman of intellect and imagination needs a companion who sees things clearly and calmly through his brain, and not through some other channel, vaguely called 'feeling' and 'soul,' but really prejudice."

"Of course that has rather a clever and plausible sound," said Cecil, resting her chin on her hands and gazing at the blue expanse in front of her, "but if you mean that brain is the only thing, or even the chief thing, to be considered, I don't agree with you a bit. There is an ingredient in our compositions which is neither body nor intellect, and which certainly is not prejudice. What is it makes us enjoy that view over the sea, or listening to good music, or feel pain at the sight or knowl-

THE YOKE

edge of suffering? It is not our brains. I think if we were to be guided by mind entirely we should often be led astray."

She had not looked at him while she spoke, and she continued to gaze seaward, her face wearing a somewhat rapt and earnest expression. Maurice was leaning with his back upon one of the supports of the veranda, looking down at her. Slowly, subtly, as he looked, she entered into his being in a way she had never done before. He began by thinking how white her hands were, then how soft and delicate her cheek and the profile of her face, then, with a rush, how infinitely, utterly graceful and desirable her whole exquisite personality. It seemed a startling exemplification of the very points she had been pressing. He was vividly conscious that it was an enjoyment to watch her as she sat there, to realise her grace, her femininity, her delicate charm and beauty; and he recognised that, whatever it was that made it such, it was not his brain.

It was not; yet neither was it his soul. There is a soul within us, but it is not the basis of sexual love nor of the delight which one sex takes in the other; and even in the highest manifestations of that magnetism, when fundamental causes are

THE YOKE

most obscured, we are not entitled to assume that it is. Sex attraction occupies too vital a place in the universal scheme to be left to the uneven advocacy of the soul.

For a few moments Maurice permitted his new and delightful sensation full play. Then it broke upon him abruptly what it meant, or what it might grow to mean, and how profoundly the conditions in which he was living could be affected by it. It seemed to him—it had so seemed to him from the first, though hitherto the matter had not appeared important—that there were certain chords in his nature which, by accepting Angelica's generosity, he was bound in honour to leave permanently mute. He left his place and threw himself rather sharply into a chair further along the veranda, some yards from Cecil.

"Why have you gone over there?" she said, looking round. "You don't mind your ideas being questioned, do you?"

"Not in the least," said Maurice. "Far from that, I think you have quite convinced me that you are right."

"Come back, then," she said, smiling, "and let me hear some more of them. You talk rather well sometimes, although always like a very young man."

THE YOKE

"That's as great an insult as if I were to say that you talked like a very old woman," replied Maurice, without, however, changing his seat.

"Oh, that wouldn't be an insult," said Cecil. "The 'very' saves it. An old woman is supposed to talk foolishly, but a very old woman is full of wisdom. I've no objection to be considered to talk like a very old woman, if your exclusiveness so wishes."

She was glancing across the space between them with a delicious affectation of solemnity, as she threw the final gibe at him.

"At all events, you—" Maurice suddenly checked himself.

"Yes?" said Cecil, firmly.

"At all events, you don't *look* like one," he finished, a little against his will.

Cecil laughed joyfully. "That's the first time, since I've known you," she asserted, "that you've paid me anything remotely resembling a compliment."

Maurice laughed, too, at that. "Oh, well," he said, "one is obliged to speak the truth sometimes, even to one's best friends; and I thought you were looking rather jolly, Cecil—a moment ago."

THE YOKE

"Not now?" Chaffing eyes pointed the interrogatory.

"Yes, now, if you like. I believe you are as vain as everybody else."

"That's not fair," said Cecil, emphatically.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't answer that question."

Maurice still wondered why not, and failing to evolve a satisfactory explanation, he lighted a cigarette. Cecil returned to her book.

They were so sitting when a skirt swished quickly across the room behind them and Angelica came out upon the veranda. She was looking her best, fresh and bright in a holland gown trimmed with lace, and in excellent spirits.

"I think we will have tea out here this afternoon," she said. "It's lovely, isn't it?" She turned back for a moment into the sitting-room to give an order. "Good gracious, have you quarrelled?" She glanced with a smile from one to the other and seated herself in a vacant chair between them.

"Maurice suddenly took it in his head to go over there," said Cecil. "I don't know if I ought to be offended."

THE YOKE

"She said I talked like a very young man," said Maurice, subtly evading the real point.

"If she were to say that twenty years hence," said Angelica, drawing her chair back to make room for the maid with tea, "you would rise up and call her blessed."

"Lately," said Cecil, glancing gravely across at Maurice, "he has been rather inclined to have views and to state them."

"That's a genuine grievance," said Angelica, arranging the cups. "A person may have views, but he mustn't state them. At least, not unless he is asked."

"Well, I was never very keen on taking my notions at second hand," said Maurice, "and I've been less so since—since—"

He was about to say "since Chris's death," then remembered Cecil and checked himself rather clumsily.

"Since you came to years of indiscretion," remarked Angelica. "I think you had better bring another table," she said to the maid; "there will hardly be room for everything on this."

Maurice got up hastily and handed the plates. When Cecil took some bread-and-butter he again noticed how white her hand was. It also occurred

THE YOKE

to him how soft and supple and warm it would feel inside one's own—not holding it as one does in shaking hands, but binding thumb and everything inside an enveloping clasp. Then she looked up and said "Thank you" and looked down again. Something was playing tricks with him. It was the most commonplace phrase in the world—she had said it to him scores of times before—and she always spoke softly like that—it was her natural voice. And it was absurd to suppose that there was anything different, anything significant, in the momentary glance. Yet it had gone through him—through and through him—like an electric current.

"Am I to be allowed none?" said Angelica.

Her voice startled Maurice. He turned and saw that she was stretching her hand across the tea-table. It was as white as Cecil's, but not so tapering, and it had more jewels on it. Maurice felt a deep compunction for his slight aberration, far deeper than the mere fact explained. Beneath it was a sense of at least some temporary mental disloyalty. Instead of immediately handing her the bread-and-butter plate, he put out his empty hand and took hers in a friendly clasp.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear; I didn't see you

THE YOKE

were waiting," he said. Then he passed her the plate.

Cecil had often before seen such small acts of *camaraderie* between these two, and always hitherto they had appealed to her as very natural and delightful. To-day, for some reason that she could not have defined, it gave her the feeling that she was lonely, that she was out in the cold. It seemed to bring home to her suddenly, to focus for her sharply in a clear light just how completely lonely she was. Since her double bereavement these friends of her childhood had come to occupy the position of the only fellow-creatures who could speak to her heart. Her mother's death had removed the chief bond with her aunt. She had always got on well with her, but their outlooks were too dissimilar to provoke any real sympathy, and even though they might continue to live together, it seemed unlikely that their intercourse could ever be much more than superficial. As for her remaining relations—the relatives on her father's side—they were pleasant and amiable people, but they had interests of their own, and she had not been accustomed to see much of them. Her existence or otherwise could not, in the nature of things, be of great moment to them.

THE YOKE

Among all living people there remained only Angelica and Maurice who were able really to feel with her, who could understand her interests and aims and thoughts. And this trifling incident, this easy, spontaneous hand-clasp had shown her that even they, deep down, were and must be apart from her. She was very closely *with* them—they showered kindness upon her, she knew they would never speak or think otherwise than well of her—but she was not *of* them. She was of nobody—nobody in the whole world.

Cecil was not given to self-pity, but this sudden realisation of her utter loneliness struck rather sharply to her heart and, though she tried to hide it, produced for a time a perceptible droop in her spirits.

After tea Maurice retreated into the house. Having succeeded in forming a tolerable hybrid between an “e” and an “a” to fill the doubtful space in “dependent,” and subsequently finished his letter, he re-appeared on the veranda and asked if they had anything for the post.

“No,” said Angelica, “but you might go into the grocer’s and ask them why they haven’t sent the coffee. And do you think you could buy me three reels of white cotton—one eighty and two sixty?”

THE YOKE

"Saints alive!" said Maurice.

"Well, you needn't."

"Yes, I'll get them, of course. Anything for you, Cecil?"

"No," said Cecil, "thank you."

Angelica took her hand when Maurice had gone.

"You are quiet, dear," she said. "Have you been worrying?"

"Oh, no," said Cecil, "not that. I remember sometimes. I'm so sorry; I'm sure I'm a nuisance to you. But little things start one's thoughts and then everything comes back again. I was thinking what a wearisome place the world would be if one had no friends."

"Of course it would," said Angelica. "We are fond of laughing at our fellow-beings, but we are dependent upon them for every bit of happiness we have, almost for our sane existence."

"It's easy to understand why the masses have such an objection to emigrating," said Cecil. "The air, the space, the scenery—one imagines at first that it would be lovely for people out of crowded towns. But nothing could compensate for the solitude; and I suppose that is what they feel."

THE YOKE

"'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay,'" quoted Angelica, with a smile. "I think so too. But what has made you talk like this? You have quantities of friends."

"Not close friends," replied Cecil, "who know me well and would really much care what became of me. In fact, only you—you and—and Maurice. No one else."

Angelica did not miss the slight hesitation on the proper name.

"Oh, you mustn't let yourself imagine foolish things of that kind," she said, after a hardly perceptible pause. "Come, I prophesy that in a very little time—much sooner than you think, perhaps—you will forget completely that you ever had such gloomy fancies."

Cecil found it difficult to throw off her slight fit of depression, however. The excuse for it might have been thought to have been removed. One of the parties to the hand-clasp was now showing equal affection to herself. Angelica's hand was in hers, Angelica's voice was comforting her. Yet she still felt lonely, she still felt out in the cold. Which—it may be stated—came quite as a surprise to Cecil.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Maurice laid his head upon his pillow that night, he told himself firmly that there were several matters which could well occupy his mind until he should fall asleep. He could think, for instance, of his forthcoming call to the Bar, now only a few months distant; he could picture what he would look like in wig and gown (an exercise which had not so far been neglected) and confirm the decision, which in spite of its original inflexible character was in constant need of confirmation, that in no circumstances would he be guilty of the feeble affectation of having his photograph taken in that costume; he could wonder if a man (without the lead) would be justified in doubling "no trumps" with five probable tricks in clubs, two other aces and hearts void, and how the position would be affected if nothing had been said about the heart convention; he could think of Angelica, of the honey-sweet joy and the exquisite peace she had instilled into his life, of the care and thought that she had ungrudgingly bestowed upon him since he was a child, of all, indeed, that he owed her and must ever owe her; or he could think—yes—he

THE YOKE

could think of Chris, of poor Chris, his boyish face, his happy, sunny nature and his tragic fate—a fate which, but for Angelica, he himself would have had an equal chance of sharing. On each or all of these things he could permit his mind to dwell with the utmost propriety, even with advantage. But there was one subject on which he could not, must not, should not think, and that subject was—Cecil.

This matter of the regulation of our mental energy, however, is one over which the strongest of us have but an imperfect command. Could we control our thoughts with equal facility as, say, our speech or our movements, the world would perhaps be a happier, and certainly a calmer place to live in. In this respect Maurice, especially in a semi-somnolent state, was no exception to the general rule. He made a genuine effort, but his subjects overlapped and got into confusion. And so, after vaguely wondering if it would be right to call the Bar on a high-court judge and four junior counsel, or if he ought to pass the declaration, he eventually dropped into a pleasant slumber under the influence of a delicious explanation, which had slid into his mind, of Cecil's protest that it was unfair to call her vain for extracting a compliment from him.

THE YOKE

Love, in the abstract, may be made in heaven, but the concrete expression of it which leads to marriage is assuredly a matter of opportunity. Every man and every woman is originally capable of love, but one compelled to pass existence on an uninhabited island would manifestly never know its fever. Conversely, if a young couple of opposite sex, between whom there is nothing actually repellent or antipathetic, are brought together by circumstances with sufficient persistency, it is practically a certainty that they will come to love each other. Since the renewal of their childhood's acquaintance, eighteen months ago, Maurice and Cecil had continued, through a series of short occasional meetings, upon terms of easy friendship. Had no opportunity of more continuous companionship fallen in their way, they might never have discovered the potentialities of deeper attraction which they held for one another—might each, instead, have eventually realised some other of the thousand similar potentialities dormant within them. The opportunity had occurred, however; and thenceforward Maurice could hardly have escaped the necessity for his nocturnal mental exercises and for his subsequent

THE YOKE

daily struggles to avoid further inhalations of the sweet contagion.

It was, to say the truth, an uncommonly stiff task which he had set himself—much stiffer than he the least realised when he first put his hand to it—nothing less than to break the claim of his youth—that youth which calls to youth inevitably. Nevertheless, it was a task which he attacked with firm determination. A sentimental attachment was a matter with which he had no concern. In that respect he was not as other men are. He did not allow himself even to question that his original rights to love and to marry had been hypothecated and had passed from him.

But love is a condition which comes pitifully little under control of the will, when you are brought into daily contact with the object calculated to inspire it. Maurice made no attempt to conceal that fact from himself, and he squarely faced the question whether he ought to pack up and return to town instantler. It would be a discourtesy as a host; that was a quibble. It would be a breach of faith with Angelica, after having undertaken to spend a month at Lynton; that also was a quibble; and both objections he honestly discarded as such. But there was a further con-

THE YOKE

sideration which was assuredly not of that nature; namely, that a policy of flight would be utterly futile, since their intercourse with Cecil in the future must almost inevitably be even greater than it had formerly been. He could go away; but to go away and see her face no more was hardly a practical possibility in existing circumstances. Essentially he must accustom himself to her presence and get the better of this queer madness that had come upon him, drill himself until he could again regard her dispassionately in the old friendly way.

He was not assisted, it must be confessed, by a slight concurrent change in Cecil's manner towards himself—a change all the more perceptible from her evident desire not to make it. It scarcely amounted to constraint, but there was a subtle something—an occasional hesitation, the smallest of catches in her voice, a passing quivering uncertainty in her glance. For a time, however, Angelica's presence made it possible to avoid any but short, incidental *tête-à-tête* conversations. At those times they spoke only on commonplace topics; but each such trifling talk left something behind it which, in spite of his utmost effort, returned to Maurice's mind, in moments of quiescence, with

THE YOKE

soft insistence. In this way a week passed; and then this game of hide-and-seek they were semi-consciously playing ended, as sooner or later, it was bound to end. Willy-nilly, they were thrown for a solid afternoon into one another's sole society.

Angelica had a headache, and the day was so fine that there was no excuse for remaining indoors.

"You had better take the pony and the tea-basket," said Angelica, "and go to the Doone Valley. You haven't seen it yet. Or you can go on foot to Waters Meet."

"I would rather stay with you," said Cecil, with that little catch in her voice, dropping hastily into a chair beside the couch on which Angelica was resting, as if it would afford her an anchor. "I will sit and read to you, dear."

"Nonsense," said Angelica. "I am quite well enough to read to myself. Where's Maurice? Maurice!"

Maurice was on the veranda. He came in slowly through the window.

"Maurice, you must take Cecil for a long walk."

"It would be awfully jolly," said Maurice, not without perceptible hesitation, "but I don't think we will leave you this afternoon, Angelica."

THE YOKE

"Dear me," exclaimed Angelica, "how stupid you both are about me! I don't anticipate immediate dissolution. I have only got one of my quite ordinary heads. You will make it worse if you worry me. Cecil, go and put your things on."

"You are sure?" said Maurice.

"You are *quite* sure?" said Cecil.

"Oh, be off with you!" cried Angelica. "Be off!"

And so, at last, they were driven out of the house before Angelica's derision.

She listened to their footsteps as they walked along the short gravel path and heard the little wooden gate at the end close behind them. From where she lay she could see the line of red-brown cliff, set in its field of sapphire. Long after the sound of them had passed out of hearing she remained looking out at the distant view, her aching head resting on the cushion. She sighed once, softly. Then she took up her book and began to read.

"Where shall we go?" said Maurice.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" said Cecil. "Whichever way you like."

"I don't think it matters much," he said.

THE YOKE

"Shall we go down into Lynmouth and along the valley to Waters Meet?"

"Yes," replied Cecil.

Poor children! Both their hearts were beating fast. They were intensely, exquisitely conscious of one another; and each was struggling desperately to conceal the fact beneath an assumption of indifference.

"I always think the bay looks very jolly when the sun catches the tips of the waves like that," Maurice said aloud.

In his heart he was crying exultantly, "For hours we are going to be alone. For hours—hours."

Cecil, her light skirt fluttering a little in the breeze, looked seaward, holding her hat, and said that she thought so too. And, all the while, she hardly saw the sea.

Their way lay through that pleasant, grassy upland, bearing the imposing but inappropriate title "The Valley of Rocks," and thence down a steep road to the dozen or so houses huddled on the banks of a torrent, comprising the village of Lynmouth. From here they followed the little river up a wooded valley, and were accompanied for the rest of their walk by that pleasantest of all

THE YOKE

sounds on a hot afternoon, the sound of running water, now clear and strenuous, now faint and slumbrous, according as their path approached or receded from the stream. They had ample opportunity to listen to it, for their stock of small talk and generalities dragged rather painfully to exhaustion, and neither of them felt capable of pushing the conversation into the more intimate channels of former days.

"We don't seem to be getting on as well as usual," said Maurice, abruptly, from sheer necessity to say something, after they had walked for several hundred yards in silence.

"No," said Cecil, "I think we are both rather dull and stupid this afternoon."

"It's my fault," said Maurice. "What do we generally talk about?"

Cecil made a little scoffing sound. "Oh!—what we have been doing, or what we have been reading, or what we have been thinking—anything that comes into our heads."

The third item brought vividly to Maurice's mind his exercises in restraint of thought. Immediately retrospective conversation would evidently require delicate treatment. He struck for the other direction.

THE YOKE

"Why not what we are going to do," he said, "or going to read, or going to think?"

"You are stupider than ever," said Cecil, with a half laugh. "How can we talk about what we are going to think? No one knows that."

"Oh, yes," said Maurice, "lots of people. Professional politicians, when they have an idea their side is likely to go under, know perfectly well; so do handwriting experts, as soon as they get a solicitor's letter asking them to come and look at a cheque."

"I don't believe it," said Cecil.

"Well, at any rate we can talk about what we are going to do—you especially. Shall you go on living at Haslemere?"

"I've hardly thought," said Cecil, slowly. "It depends upon Aunt Annie. Yes, I suppose so."

Her tone had struck a note of melancholy—at least, of pensiveness.

"Oh, dear!" said Maurice. "I'm afraid it will be lonely, Cecil, and horribly dull."

"Yes, of course," said Cecil, "at first. It isn't that. So much has happened there that—that—oh, that I wish hadn't happened."

She walked on quickly. They had come to a small stone bridge which carried the path across

THE YOKE

the stream. Cecil sat on the parapet and looked over. Several small trout were darting hither and thither in the water below.

"How pretty they are!" she exclaimed. "Come and look. You can see them so clearly."

She had stretched a hand upon the stone coping on either side of her to support her as she leaned over. As Maurice bent down to look, he did the same; and, by purest accident, the tips of his fingers fell lightly upon the extremity of the hand nearest him. She did not withdraw it. *She did not withdraw it.* The realisation of that throbbed through every vein in Maurice's body. To touch her was sweet; to find the touch quietly permitted was very heaven. The knowledge that his hand was on hers and that she *knew* it and allowed it to be so, ran through his blood in waves of utter ecstasy. The full voltage of a galvanic battery could have held his own hand less powerfully than the tips of those slender fingers. They talked of the fishes, of the way the water rippled over the stones, of the view up the valley, of each trifle that caught their eye and could help them to go on pretending to be unconscious of that exquisite contact—unconscious of that which, for the time being, had made fishes and stream and valley, the world

THE YOKE

and the people in it, insignificant items in the sum of things.

At last they turned round and sat upright on the parapet. Cecil continued to look down at the stream sideways, and she picked at the coping and threw small pieces of cement into the water. Maurice watched her with eyes as little answerable to his will as his hand had been.

"Does it make you unhappy, Cecil?" he said, after a while.

"Does what?" she asked.

"That you have to go back to Haslemere?"

She flung down several scraps of rubble before replying. "Perhaps it would if I thought about it," she said. "I try not to."

"But do you think you can prevent thoughts—some thoughts?"

The tabooed subject had quickly wormed its way to expression, and that in a tone of tense earnestness which left its application open to no doubt.

Cecil had ceased dropping scraps into the stream, but her hand was still on the parapet. She moved her forefinger slowly in a circle on the masonry and kept her eyes fixed upon it.

"No," she answered in a low voice.

THE YOKE

A light flush gradually mounted her cheeks. Maurice realised, in an amazing moment, that he had reached a point from which retreat was as impossible as advance. Some words must pass between them now. He could not answer that soft avowal—for soft avowal he knew it to be—with a return to the commonplace. The only thinkable reply—swift, flooding, fervent—was that which was burning on his lips but could not be uttered. Every moment that he waited was a deep offence.

“Oh, Cecil, Cecil!” he cried low.

Cecil answered the tone. She looked up—looked up and met his glance. What he read in her eyes swept every other thought from his mind. He seized her hands, drew her towards him, clasped her to his heart, in the mad rapture of that knowledge of love returned, which, at its first wonderful apprehension, gives a new meaning to creation. Cecil yielded herself to his embrace with a little sigh of happy confidence, like a child which has been wandering lost and has found a friend. For five seconds they were both utterly happy. Then Maurice remembered.

He dropped his arms and drew back, almost incredulous of his own act.

THE YOKE

"Oh, heaven, what have I done?" he cried. "I had no right to."

Cecil merely looked at him. She was too bewildered to speak. The sudden transition left her for the moment without power even to realise it.

"Forgive me?" said Maurice, after a moment's interval. "Forgive me, Cecil. I can never forgive myself."

Cecil's mind slowly fixed upon the astonishing thing that was happening. Credulity wavered before the apparent explanation. Was it possible that she was about to suffer disillusion? That all these years she had known Maurice she had misread him? If that were so, it seemed to her she could never, never believe in anything in the world again. Her slight form stiffened. She became the Cecil he had known on his first visit to Haslemere, only with the dignity accentuated, the quiet stateliness more pronounced.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me," he replied. "I am not apologising for an inexcusable affront. I don't apologise. I won't. I love you."

Cecil waited, her heart leaping beneath her calm exterior.

THE YOKE

"But—" he hesitated, "but I am not free to marry. In a mad moment I forgot it."

Cecil stared at him in amazement. "You are not *free* to marry? You must be free." Then an incredible thought struck her. "You are not married already?"

"No, no, *no!*" replied Maurice.

"Then what am I to think?" said Cecil.

Poor girl, it was costing her a hard struggle to maintain her reserve. She longed to use the natural weapons of her sex and, lip to lip, to fight for her happiness from this man who had admitted his love for her.

"Cecil, I can't tell you," said Maurice. "Only believe this: I want nothing so much on earth as to ask you for that which I cannot ask you for. Life is going to be very blank for me in future; I don't know how it is going to be liveable." He stopped and cleared his throat. "Dear, will you give me your hand and say you believe me?"

Cecil gave it him—they were standing now. "I believe you, Maurice," she said. "It is very hard for me to understand, but—" she hesitated, "but it would be harder not to believe you."

They waited, wavering. It was such a shivering plunge into the still void of separation.

THE YOKE

"Of course, I sh'a'nt embarrass you by staying here after this," said Maurice, huskily, still holding her hand. "I can make some excuse to leave in the morning."

"Yes," said Cecil.

He felt her hand tremble. He raised it and pressed it to his lips. For one moment their eyes met. Then he released her hand and began to walk slowly off the bridge by the way they had come.

As Cecil turned to go with him she glanced mechanically over the parapet. The small trout were still darting about—shooting and twisting in the cold shadow, not a whit less energetically than, before, in the dazzling sunlight. It made no difference to them—oh, dear heaven!—*no difference*.

CHAPTER XXII

THE reader will have gathered through these pages—or we have portrayed her very inefficiently—that Angelica was not an unobservant person. Therefore, when she saw Maurice and Cecil return from their walk considerably earlier than she had expected them, and found during the evening that there was obviously some constraint between them, she was able to guess what had occurred within a very close margin of the truth. Her headache had improved, but it still troubled her somewhat, so she returned to her couch after dinner, and from there had to exercise all her wit to keep up a reasonable show of animation in their small party. Very early Cecil retired to her room. She kissed Angelica with a soft gush of warm affection. Gradually her friends were being eliminated. It appeared to her now as if Angelica were the only one she had left. She passed Maurice—who had opened the door for her—with a slight movement of her head and seemed to say “Good-night”; but it was inaudible.

THE YOKE

He returned into the room and began feeling mechanically for his pipe on the mantelpiece.

"Maurice," said Angelica.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Come and sit here—near me—I want to talk to you."

Maurice looked round, a little surprised. He scarcely expected that Angelica was going to lecture him. Yet he felt guilty. He knew he had not been quite loyal to her that afternoon. For two or three ecstatic moments he had forgotten her utterly, absolutely. Moreover, he was conscious that, almost from the day of Cecil's arrival at Lynton, he had not been loyal to her in his heart. He crossed the room and took a chair beside her couch.

"I want to talk to you about Cecil," she said quietly.

"Yes," he answered. He felt no power within himself to say anything more.

"You love her?" said Angelica.

Maurice flushed deeply and kept his eyes bent upon the carpet. He was not prepared for his offence to be nailed so promptly and sharply to the counter.

"I love *you*, Angelica," he said, with difficulty and without looking up.

THE YOKE

"Yes, but not quite in the same way. Don't try to deny your affection for Cecil, because I think—I *think*, remember—she may like you to feel it."

Maurice raised his head and looked at her. His face was tense and still flushed. "What do you mean, Angelica?" he said, "what do you mean me to understand?"

She uttered a light laugh, nearly naturally. "Why, that if you love Cecil, and she loves you, you will be a very silly pair if you don't get married."

A radiant light of surprised gladness flashed up in Maurice's face and flooded over it. The next moment it was gone.

"Oh, you make me feel unspeakably mean," he said, with deep humiliation. "I had a sort of half notion you were going to scold me, because I knew I deserved it. But I never get what I deserve from you—always generosity, whatever I do. As for what you have spoken of, I ask nothing but your forgiveness; I am horribly ashamed to have to ask that. I am going away to-morrow; I have told Cecil. We shall meet later on when you come back to town."

"Stupid boy!" But his words had sunk grate-

THE YOKE

fully to her heart. "You have been happy this last year?" she said, softly.

"Oh, perfectly," he answered, earnestly.

"And you have been faithful to me all the time?"

"You know I have."

"Yes, I know it." She paused. "Well, now you will have to begin to be faithful to someone else."

Maurice started to speak, but she stopped him and continued, "I never had the least desire or thought to keep you from marriage, Maurice. I always realised, I—I even hoped you would marry some day. When I asked Cecil to visit us here I knew it might lead to it; when I sent you out together this afternoon I was certain it would. I have chosen a wife for you, though you may not realise it. I have only to see that you marry her, and then my stewardship, which began on the day when I first had to submit to have my dresses spoiled by grubby fingers, will come to an end. I shall have earned my discharge, wash my hands of you and live in peace."

She spoke lightly, almost gaily, but there was a deeper chord struck occasionally which spoke with far surer a voice than a great parade of

THE YOKE

lamentation. In truth, the actual imminence of this breach, inevitable though she had always known it to be, had come upon her somewhat more hardly than she had expected. But she had no intention of swerving a hair's-breadth from the course she had consistently pursued with regard to Maurice—from the undertaking to "look after the kiddie" to which she had devoted so much of her life. Her personal part in that matter had been played. She had borne him safely through the perilous zone between manhood and marriage which had cost poor Chris his life and many others much more than life. He had now come to the stage when it was well for him that he should marry; and the only thing that stood in the way was her own individual loss. That was a consideration which had never found any chance to weigh with her.

Maurice was not deceived by her tone. "I am not going to be disposed of in that way, Angelica," he said, quietly. "You and I have scraped along together very nicely for twenty years; and there is no reason why we shouldn't go on doing so for another twenty, or forty, or sixty, however long it may please Providence to leave us both above ground."

THE YOKE

Angelica gave him a grateful look. It was impossible not to feel some pride in the fact of this handsome youth, in the flush of his morning of promise, when the world was beginning to expand before him, calmly offering to devote his life to her—to her who had passed the time of her illusions and grown grey in suffering and service. It was not a perfunctory offer, which expects a refusal; it was real; the simple expression of a thought consistently held and deeply felt. If he owed her anything, in her heart she felt she was repaid.

The next moment she turned it off with a half satirical laugh. "My dear boy, have you any idea how old I am?"

"I know you are about forty," he answered, "and that is as much as I want to know. You don't look it, and I shouldn't care if you did. You won't scare me by references to that subject. So far as beauty goes, I never met a woman to touch you—not even Cecil. Sometimes you are perfectly superb."

Angelica laughed at him, but she blushed too—partly from involuntary human pleasure at this eulogy, so obviously spontaneous and sincere, partly from the "sometimes." But the "some-

THE YOKE

times," especially at this moment of renunciation, could not be ungrateful to her. To a woman, if she be a woman at all, there must of necessity be satisfaction in the knowledge that those personal gifts, profusely lavished upon her by a bountiful Providence, have not finally withered on their stem unseen and unappreciated.

"You mustn't try to make me vain in my old age," she said lightly. "And certainly you must not begin by depreciating Cecil."

"I couldn't do that," said Maurice.

"No, I am sure you couldn't." She raised herself a little on the sofa. "Now, dear, I want you to treat me as if this last year had never been. It is past—it is not forgotten, it can never be—but it is no longer between us. I want you to make me just your guide, philosopher and friend, as I used to be. You love her?"

"Yes," said Maurice, after a slight pause and in a low voice.

"Then you must marry her, Maurice, if she will take you. You owe it to her, as well as to yourself."

"But how can I," he burst out, "how can I break with you in this way after all we have been to one another? I should despise myself for

THE YOKE

evermore. I owe nothing to Cecil; I owe everything to you."

"You do owe something to Cecil, if you have made her love you. No, no"—she put up her hand—"don't interrupt me; you have not done it intentionally, but if she loves you, you owe something to her. As for me, the balance is level between us. If I had thought that you would consider yourself permanently bound to me, I should not have permitted what has been. Why, you goose, if that were not so, we might just as well have married and avoided all this defying of conventionalities."

"Will you marry me?" said Maurice, abruptly.

"No," said Angelica, flatly.

"But if Cecil were not in question?"

"Even then I wouldn't."

"Why not?" said Maurice.

"In the first place, because there is much too great a difference in age between us, and in the second, and more important, because I don't feel for you, and you don't feel for me, that completely absorbing, self-extinguishing devotion which only can make tied wedlock satisfactory."

Maurice leisurely digested this frank statement. That it had exercised a considerable modifying

THE YOKE

influence upon his attitude was evidenced by his next words, which ran off on a new tack.

"Oh, but the position would be impossible," he said, "with such a secret between us. Every day, every hour almost, one would feel it. It is not as if Cecil and you were strangers."

Angelica stretched forward and straightened her skirts, which had twisted uncomfortably. Then she dropped her head again upon the cushion.

"Cecil must be told," she said.

Maurice stared at her. "Told?" he said.

"Told—told—told."

It took him a little time to grasp how this would affect each of them. "It is worst for you," he cried suddenly. "It is always worst for you."

"No, it is worst for you, dear," said Angelica. "I have less to lose—Cecil's friendship, her respect, perhaps—I can't tell how she will view it. You—well, all your future happiness."

"But you have nothing to gain," insisted Maurice, "absolutely nothing; and what you have to lose is always more for a woman than it is for a man."

"My dear boy, for a moment—if you can—put me out of the question, or, rather, my feelings. If it affected simply Cecil and you, would you ask

THE YOKE

her to marry you in ignorance, or would you let her know the truth and take your chance of a refusal?"

"It is an impossible position to conceive," said Maurice. "If you were not concerned, there would be no question. The ordinary wandering bachelor lapses would not be on my conscience."

"No; but imagine a consistent lapse, affecting a great friend of the girl you wished to marry, but one whose feelings, for some reason, had not to be considered?"

"It's no good," said Maurice. "You can't divorce her feelings. They *must* have to be considered. That is an essential and inalienable part of the situation."

"Well, I'll put it in this way: you couldn't marry her without telling her?"

"That's a leading question," said Maurice.

"My learned friend is very exigent," smiled Angelica. "Could you marry her without telling her?"

"No," said Maurice, unwillingly, "I suppose I couldn't."

"I'm glad I've made you admit it at last," said Angelica. "Not that it really makes any difference. Now, listen. Cecil has gone to bed, but I

THE YOKE

don't think to sleep, or perhaps even to get undressed, poor dear. So I shall go to her room and talk to her and—and tell her.”

Maurice sprang from his seat. “You shall *not*,” he cried.

“You can prevent me by force,” said Angelica, calmly, “but not by any other means. As for you; keep to your arrangements, pack your things, be ready to start in the morning, unless”—she dropped her voice—“unless I bring you some news in the meantime.”

Maurice, who had taken a few agitated steps, stopped and looked down upon her; partly with abounding admiration, partly with something like resentment and anger. Then, in a sudden gust of deep emotion, he sank on the floor, seized the hem of her dress and pressed it to his lips.

“No, no,” said Angelica, “not that! Come and kiss me—just once more.” She opened her arms.

He knelt beside her, he slipped his hands beneath her head, he brought his lips to hers.

Angelica put her arms about him and strained him to her bosom.

CHAPTER XXIII

APART from its personal aspect, there were many doubts and difficulties surrounding Angelica in the mission she had set herself. She knew that if Cecil adopted the rigidly orthodox view—the view which her mother would have taken—she would be obliged, to be consistent, to wreck her happiness. Angelica herself was still as profoundly sure of the righteousness of the line she had followed as she had been at the beginning; but to feel that conviction herself and to impress it upon another, especially one brought up in an atmosphere of rigorously opposing sentiment, were far indeed from being one and the same thing.

Such thoughts were in her mind as she paused momentarily outside Cecil's door, the light of the candle she carried shining up into her face, reflected in warm tones by the rose-coloured dressing-gown she was wearing. She knocked softly and, receiving no response, opened the door and went in.

Cecil was laid on the bed with her face to the

THE YOKE

pillow, also in a dressing-gown—a white one—her outer garments thrown carelessly on a chair. She made no attempt to hide the fact that she had been weeping—indeed, that she was weeping then. Angelica crossed the room quietly and sat down beside her.

"Cecil, dear," she said, "I have come to make you my mother-confessor to-night."

Cecil lifted her head and looked round, her tear-stained face surprised and wondering. She dashed aside her private troubles and uttered a little incredulous laugh. "What rubbish, Angelica! Whoever would believe that you needed a confessor?"

"I didn't say *a* confessor," said Angelica. "But I need your absolution."

"Then you have it without telling me the crime," said Cecil, promptly.

Angelica shook her head. "That won't do," she said. "You must absolve with your eyes wide, wide open."

The look of mystification in Cecil's face quickened to slight excitement and blurred to some extent her deeper feeling. She leaned her cheek in her hand.

"What is it?" she said.

THE YOKE

"Have you no suspicion," said Angelica, "not even a little?"

She spoke in a low voice, earnestly.

Cecil returned her look as frankly as a child, and with a child's waxing curiosity. "None, none," she replied.

Angelica waited. Cecil dropped her head again upon the pillow. Her fair hair was tumbled and loose; it fell in pathetic carelessness on her shoulder. Angelica watched her in thoughtful silence. It would have been easier if she had been less completely in the dark. After a while she approached her subject from a new direction.

"You are very unhappy, Cecil?" she said, softly.

"Yes," said Cecil.

Poor child, it was pitifully impossible to deny it.

Angelica rested her arms on the bed. "Will you trust me with your secret?" she said. "I am very trustable."

Cecil met her earnest gaze for a moment, and then dropped her eyes. "I think you know," she said.

"Yes," said Angelica, quietly, "I think I do. Things have happened to-day which mystify you. Maurice has not asked you to marry him, though you know he loves you, and you wonder why?"

There was no answer.

THE YOKE

"I have come to tell you why," said Angelica.

Cecil slowly rose to a sitting posture and swung her stockinged, shoeless feet over the edge of the bed. She pushed back the hair from her temples. She did not immediately connect this statement with Angelica's previous one that she had come to make a confession, but she realised vaguely that for the latter to be able to supply an explanation which could not be given by Maurice was a fact pregnant of some intimate meaning.

"Oh, then you know," she said, partly to herself.

Angelica was silent a few moments. She gazed at the small pointed shoes protruding from the hem of her dressing-gown. It was by no means an easy task she had set her hand to, even in its personal aspect. For Maurice's sake she was going to bow herself before this young girl. She looked up and met Cecil's gaze fixed upon her, serious, wondering, but without any indication that she as yet had any suspicion of the truth.

"Oh, do try to understand, dear," Angelica said urgently. "I am much older than you—it is very hard to speak." She dropped her eyes again. "Maurice doesn't ask you to marry him because—because of his relations with me." The last words were hardly breathed.

THE YOKE

Cecil dropped to her feet and stood upright.

"With *you!*" It was less an exclamation than a gasp.

Had she been told that Maurice was a phantom of her imagination, it would have broken upon her with no greater a shock of blinding astonishment.

"With me," said Angelica, this time looking Cecil in the face and speaking firmly, almost proudly. The latter's spontaneous cry had been faintly inflected, or so it seemed to her, with a note of dismay, of withdrawal.

Cecil mechanically put her feet into a pair of shoes and crossed the room to the open window. Feeling like one in a dream, she sat down before it, placed her elbows on the sill and looked out. There was a half-conscious impression in her mind that the cool air might help her to realise the stupefying intelligence which had left her temporarily without power to think and to weigh. She felt as if everything in the world had suddenly been overturned and thrown into inextricable chaos. It was almost a surprise to her to see the stars still shining steadily out of space, above the faintly luminous waste of the calm sea. Truly no sight could have been more calculated to exert a

THE YOKE

composing influence on her mind. In the face of that inconceivable immensity, of those countless myriads of suns, each with its circle of planets, extending on and on, deeper and deeper, as far as the most perfect instrument could penetrate, in ever-closing and thickening ranks, until the furthest merged in a filmy blur of light—in the face of that sublime fact, what mattered the affairs of this atom in the Universe, the paltry flick of individual life upon it, of all life, from prehistoric times to the final heatless, waterless waste, our intricate moral difficulties and uncertainties, our hair-splittings with conscience, our exquisite pains to perceive minutest right?

Angelica did not interrupt her thoughts. She had still much to say to her, but it could wait until she had reaped the fruit of her communion with the great infinities. So they sat, for five minutes or more, these two women, each so exquisite in her utterly different way, in silence, one with her thoughts turned inward, the other outward. During that time there gradually settled upon Cecil a dull pain, born of no moral nor mental reckonings whatever. An hour or two ago, before she came upstairs, the thought had passed through her mind that, one by one, her intimate friends had

THE YOKE

been lost to her and that only Angelica remained. Now it struck home to her heart, far more deeply than any other feeling, that even she must not be counted upon; that her interests and concerns were apart and necessarily inimical; that henceforth she looked forth upon the world, beggared of the last stitch of steadfast human sympathy.

At last she drew her head from the window and turned round.

"It is very good of you to tell me, Angelica," she said. "I am afraid I must have been very stupid not to see for myself, or, at least, to guess enough. It makes everything easy to understand and I feel happier for that reason. Thank you for knowing you could trust me."

She spoke quietly, but not coldly. Yet there was a subtle change in her manner which, though probably quite unconsciously conveyed into it, was not lost on her hearer. Hitherto, in her intercourse with Angelica, she had been accustomed to sit at her feet, to treat her unquestioningly, in all respects, as her mentor and guide. Now her quiet tone indicated that she had assumed independence of thought.

"I know just how you must feel, Cecil," said Angelica, in her calm voice; "I should feel precisely

THE YOKE

the same if I had been told, suddenly and unexpectedly, what you have been told. But I want you to try, if you can, to keep an open mind until you know all the influences that have been at work. It is of great importance to you and to Maurice and to me that you should not form a hasty judgment. Come and sit near me; bring your chair over here and sit beside me."

Cecil obeyed her quietly.

"I won't be a hypocrite, Cecil," Angelica proceeded, when they were seated together; "I won't pretend that this life has meant any sacrifice on my part. Far from that, it has been a great joy. But I ask you to believe—to believe all the more because I have made that frank admission—that that reason alone would never have induced me to act as I have done."

"I do believe it," said Cecil in a low tone.

"There were other reasons," continued Angelica, "—or, rather, there was one other reason. Things exist in the world of which you know nothing—evil influences and physical ills which surround young men. There came a time, as Maurice grew up, when I found that to make this nearer tie with him was the only means in my power to save him from those dangers. I can't explain to

THE YOKE

you any more closely, Cecil—you are so completely untouched—”

Cecil had gradually quickened with emotion and agitation. She was straining forward. Tears again stood in her eyes.

“Untouched!” she burst in. “How can you say I am untouched, Angelica?”

“You are so young,” said Angelica, gently; “you can’t understand.”

“Untouched!” repeated Cecil, almost bitterly. “I sometimes wonder if anyone who ever lived can have been stricken more cruelly by—by these things you were speaking of—than I have been. It is those things that have taken from me my only brother and, indirectly, my mother—all the near relatives I had in the world.” Her voice quivered and broke. “And you say I am untouched!” As she finished she bowed her head into her hands and sobbed.

Angelica watched her with acute compassion. She longed to take her in her arms and comfort her, but she could not do so yet.

“I didn’t know you knew that,” she said gravely.

“How could I help?” said Cecil, between her sobs. “No one would answer my questions—the subject was shirked—I was treated like a child—

THE YOKE

I began to know it was something I must not ask. How could I help?" she repeated.

The unanswered question echoed on Angelica's brain during the silence that supervened, recurring insistently, as the last uttered phrase invariably does when a pause follows speech. Cecil's sobs by degrees grew quieter. She felt for a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"I am glad that you know," said Angelica, at last. "It will help you to understand, and to put things into the balance, much better than I could have hoped. I have no more to tell you. For all our sakes, judge kindly, if you can. And, believe me, I am utterly sure in my conscience that I have acted rightly. If I were placed in the same position again, I should not only take the same course, but without the difficulty and hesitation which I had before."

"I have nothing to judge," said Cecil, gripping her wet handkerchief into a ball.

"What do you mean by that?" said Angelica, hardly covering her anxiety. "Do you understand and forgive?"

"Forgive!" Cecil turned on her almost fiercely. "I think Maurice should be more grateful to you than words can ever express."

THE YOKE

"And you don't think he is any the worse?"

"By touching *you!*" The question was flung aside with ineffable contempt.

"Then, Cecil, you will take him?" Angelica stretched towards her.

The simple question broke upon Cecil with the full force of the wholly unexpected. The eager joy that momentarily shot into her eyes, and the shame at letting it be seen, were both overwhelmed beneath sheer amazement at magnanimity she could not have dreamed of.

"You will give him up?" she cried.

"Why, what else did you expect, little goose?" Angelica smiled for the first time, in pure, selfless relief that the happiness of these two young folk seemed likely to be accomplished.

She took Cecil's hand and continued quietly: "Maurice and I have been very happy together, before and—since. But we could not marry; it would not be good for him, it might not be good for me. I have always recognised that. I have known that, sooner or later, I should have to relinquish him." She hesitated. "It has come, perhaps, sooner. But I give him to you"—again she hesitated—"freely and without grudge—if you will take him."

THE YOKE

Except for the little breaks to make sure of herself, she finished steadily and quietly as she had begun.

Cecil had no words for reply. Among the flood of emotions that bore through her, first and foremost, transcending all others, was the thought of the deep injustice of the slight wavering of her allegiance to Angelica. It seemed that all her life would be insufficient to atone for it—to make up to her for those few minutes of weakened faith between her confession and the simple word of her unhesitating renunciation.

It was this feeling which prompted Cecil's next action. Slowly she sank on her knees, down, down, to the floor at Angelica's feet. She abased herself before her. She spread her arms upon her and laid her cheek upon her lap.

Her heart was bursting, but all that she could utter was, "Dear, dear, dear Angelica!"

Maurice was called to the Bar in November, and in the following spring he and Cecil were married quietly. The wedding took place, for convenience, from Cumberland Square. The house at Haslemere had already been given up, and Miss Gaskell, by the merits of the small competence bequeathed

THE YOKE

to her by her sister, had gone to reside permanently with congenial friends.

Angelica's final words on delivering up her charge, shouted through the window of the departing brougham, were, "Take care of the kiddie, Cecil"—an injunction which Cecil has fulfilled quite as scrupulously as is good for any masculine mortal.

As the carriage drove away, Angelica turned and walked slowly up the steps into her house.

Do you feel sad for her, reader?

Her golden summer—an Indian summer, it may be—had come and gone.

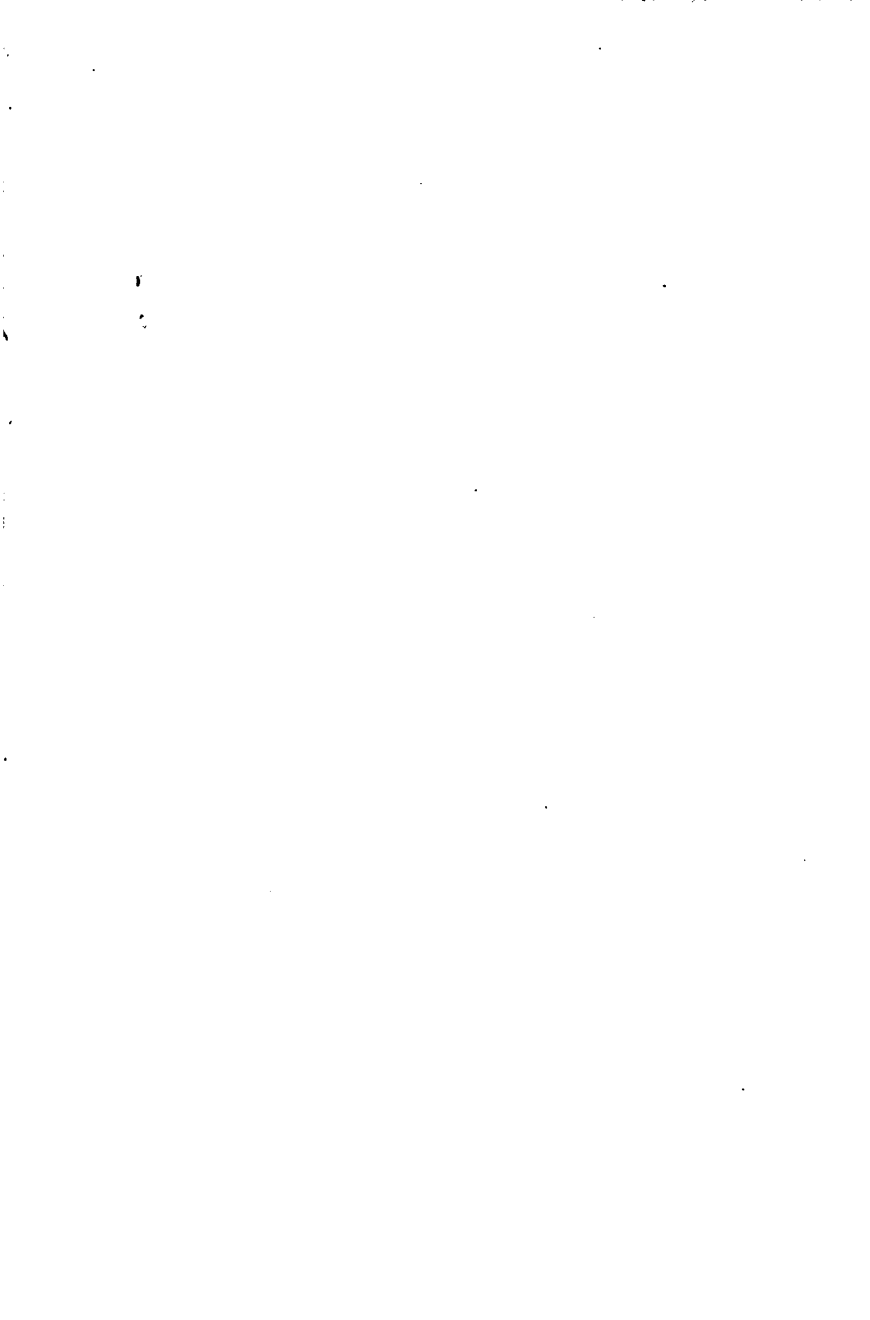
She was not sad for herself. She no longer stood where she had stood before. She had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and it had not turned to ashes in her mouth. She was equal with her fellows; her life had not been a senseless thing, an inversion of instincts; she knew herself. And over and above—in excess of that abundant measure—she had fathomed the great truth, which so few have fathomed, that the recognition of the natural law calling man to woman and woman to man is everlastingly right.

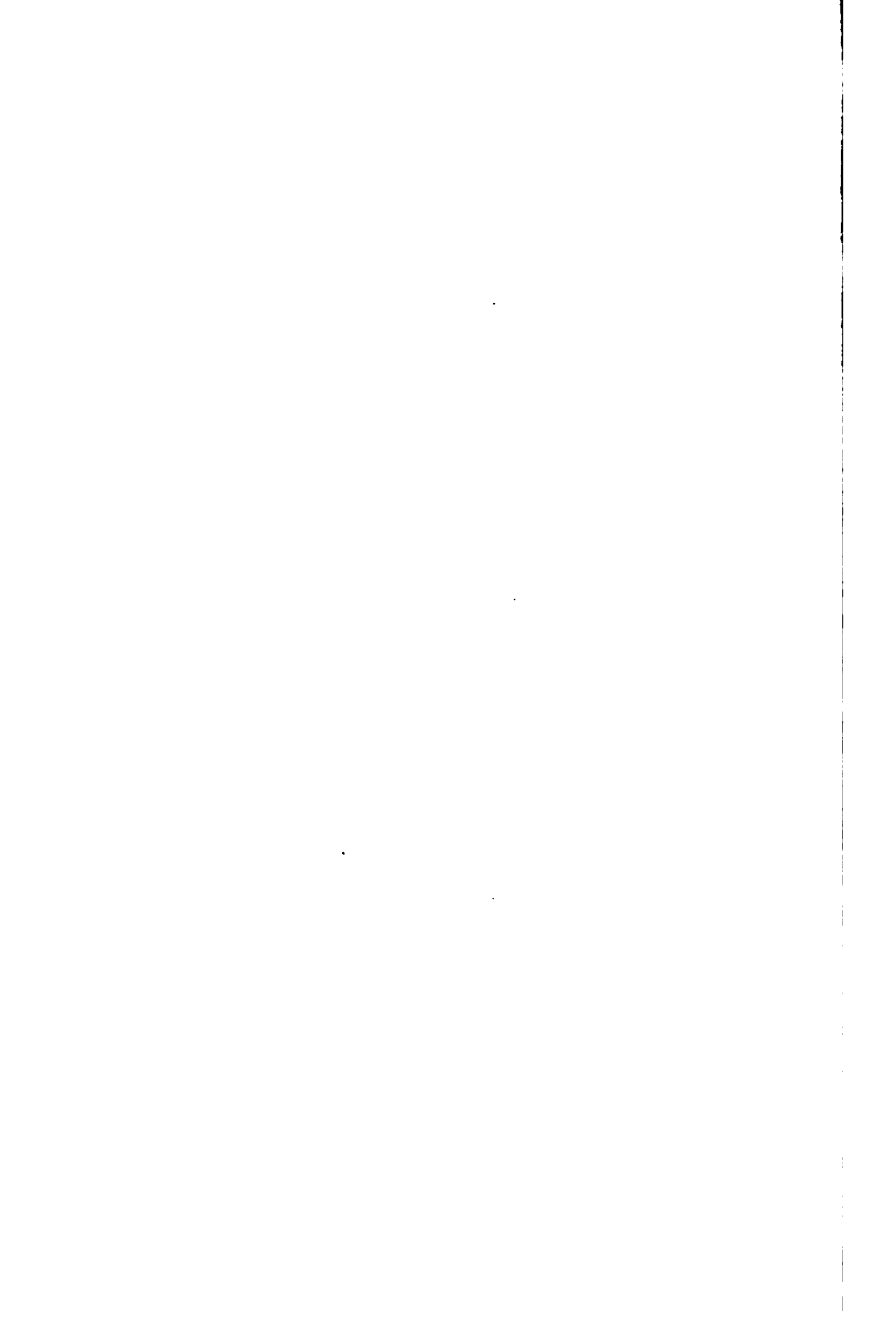
Shortly after Maurice's marriage she let her house in Cumberland Square and took a flat.

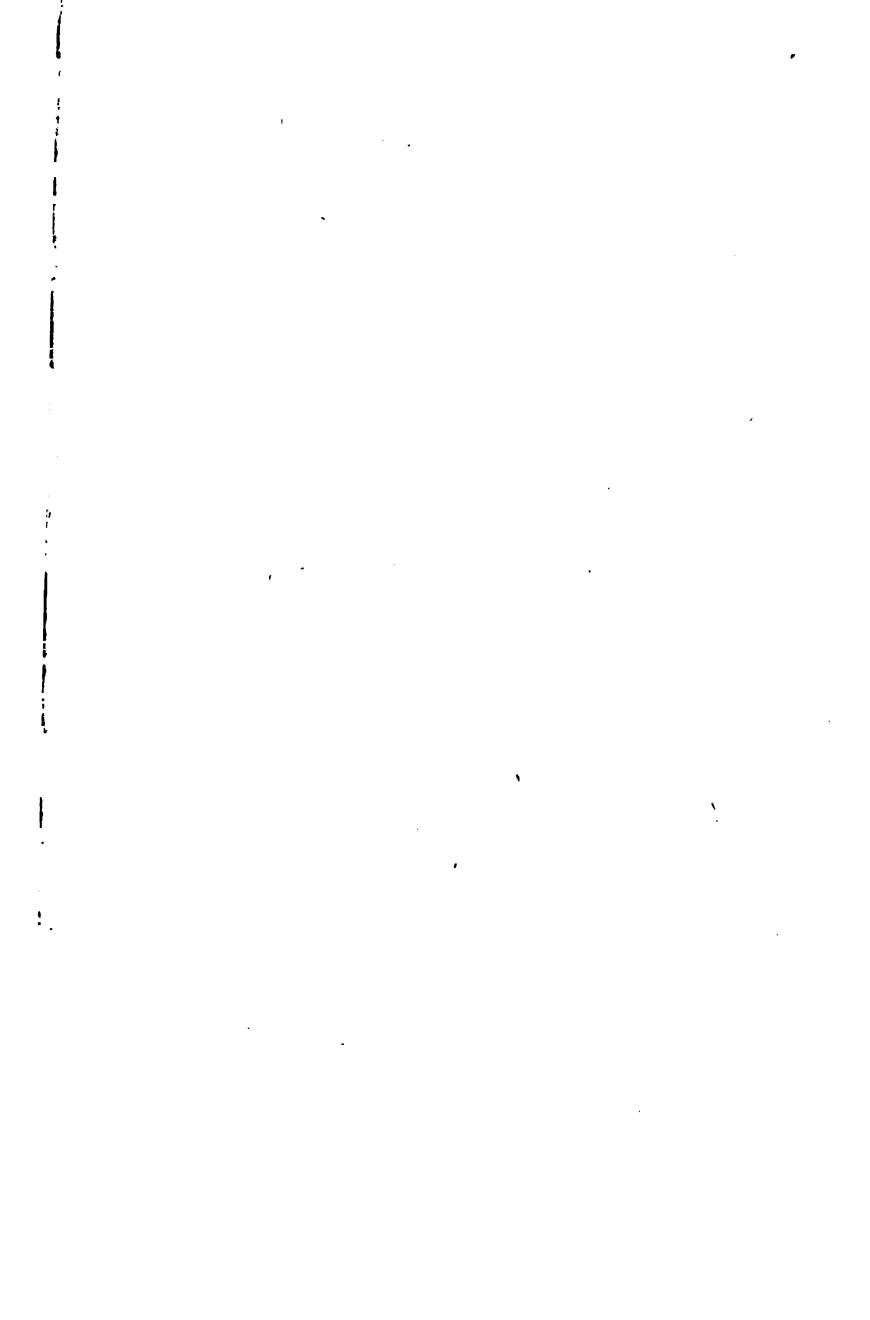
THE YOKE

There she remains the well-beloved of numberless friends. They know just so much, and no more, about her deviations from the social code as she cares to tell them. And that, let it be understood, is not to say that they are all left in ignorance. For there live—thank God!—even in this world to-day, those who can be told; not the “charitable” ones—not the ones who would believe that Angelica had done something which they, in their integrity, could forgive or overlook—but those who understand, who “see life steadily and see it whole.”

THE END







**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
BERKELEY**

**Return to desk from which borrowed.
Book is DUE on the last date stamped below.**

1961 D 1961 1964-10 PM 1975	SENT ON ILL SEP 20 1995 U. C. BERKELEY	
---	--	--

18(B899s16)476

YB 40084

395 129

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

